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Gハンター・フォルクス

神坂 一

イラスト あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 22
G-Hunter Volks

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Fossude Flourishing Chronicle [Part 1]

A group of men turned around all at once. Five pairs of eyes were filled with hostility. The one they had been surrounding was a girl with frightened eyes.

If it had been an ordinary person, they might have been intimidated, but unfortunately for them, I wasn't so sweet as to shut my mouth or tuck my tail and run at that level of pressure.

"I. Said. I was just saying how you can find this brand of thug in any town," I said, repeating the exact words I had just uttered.

"Wha—!" One of them roared.

"Hey now, I don't know who you are, but I'll thank you to stop making strange accusations," another man said, stepping in to restrain the first one and trying to brush me off.

With my black cloak, shoulder guards, and jewel talismans scattered here and there, he must have taken me for a traveling sorceress and realized the disadvantage of picking a serious fight.

"We're just planning to give a little lecture to a brat who tried to cheat us on a bill. Isn't calling us 'thugs' a bit out of line, no matter how you look at it?" He raised his voice, making sure the people passing by and the onlookers heard him.

He turned his gaze toward the "brat" the five of them had been surrounding—a girl who didn't even look ten years old. She had black hair that grew to her shoulders, which suited her quiet appearance well. Her apron dress was a bit old, but it was neatly washed.

In contrast, while the men's clothing was tidy enough, they were radiating an aura of extreme impatience from their entire bodies. Of course, in this world, looks don't decide everything, but...

I raised my voice as well to match his. "That's a very noble-sounding theme... but unfortunately, I've been watching from the start. Ever since you suddenly surrounded

her and started muttering nonsense like, 'You received too much change at the shop just now.'"

"Wh... what...?"

"The shopkeeper where she bought something is probably in on it too, and they gave her too much change on purpose as a setup... something like that, wasn't it?"

I expected them to snap back at me. Instead, the men's complexions changed. Having been hit right where it hurt, one of them glared at the girl.

"We've been misunderstood, it seems... Hey kid, it was your fault for not counting your money properly in the first place. Watch yourself from now on. Let's go!" Leaving behind that parting shot to a child, the men turned on their heels and left quite easily.

...They certainly knew when to retreat. I felt a bit let down. The onlookers who had been loitering about also dispersed—some looking relieved, others looking disappointed that the show was over.

"Um... thank you very much." The girl who was left behind bowed her head and turned her large eyes toward me. "You really helped me. Truly."

"Don't mention it, don't mention it. But it looks like... you've got some circumstances, don't you?"

At my words, the girl lowered her gaze slightly. "Yes... actually, there are a lot of things going on... in this town, too..."

"I see... Well, life usually has a lot going on, but do your best to keep living. See ya."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait!"

As I turned on my heels to walk away, for some reason, the girl grabbed my cloak firmly and stopped me. I frowned over my shoulder.

"No. Even if you say it like that... I mean, to begin with, I don't really have any obligation to stick my nose in any further."

".....Uhh..." Still clutching my cloak, she thought for a moment, then finally looked up. "That’s right! Well then—you came to this town for sightseeing, right? We

run an inn. Won't you stay with us? It's not much of a thanks for helping me, but I'll make the room rate a little cheaper for you."

"...Hmm..."

I didn't exactly *not* smell a trap—but if that was the deal, it might be worth considering.

"What is it?"

"No, well, um. If you say something like 'If you're in trouble, tell me, I'll help you' and then just end it with 'Do your best to keep living,' then well... I'm worried it might affect my emotional development as a child, thinking that humans are just creatures made of lip service after all."

She started saying something rather complicated and difficult. Anyway, I had intended to stay in this town for one night, so if that was the case, staying somewhere that would give me a discount was a viable option.

Besides, at her age, I liked her aggressive business spirit. I turned back toward her and gave a small smile.

"In that case, I'll take you up on it."

"Thank you very much!" The girl bowed once more, then put on a professional business smile. "I haven't introduced myself yet. I am Dorothy Blueberry of the Cranberry Inn. And might I ask the guest's name?"

"It's Lina. Lina Inverse," I replied when asked.

Far off the main highway, in a place that—pardon the expression—was quite remote, sat a town named Fossude. It was a small town in the mountains, but it had become something of a tourist spot.

A short distance from the town, there was a multi-tiered waterfall, and the scenery was supposedly magnificent. It wasn't exactly famous nationwide, but you'd hear the name in nearby towns and villages. I was one of those who had heard such rumors during my travels and happened to stop by while passing through.

Rumors about people always come with exaggerations. Often, you go because of what you've heard, only to find the real thing so pathetic it makes you want to go on a rampage—but the waterfall I visited upon arriving in town was exactly as rumored.

It wasn't that the scale was massive, but the water was incredibly clear. Amidst the vivid green trees, the sight of white spray falling steadily into a blue-green pool so transparent you could see the bottom was certainly worth a look.

According to the tourists (or perhaps locals pretending to be tourists) who were there, the waterfall showed a different face depending on the time of day, morning or evening. So, I decided to stay one night in this town—

"However, even in a rural tourist spot like this, there are those who seek to satisfy their desire for control! Yes, like Dylan Longhome, the owner of the Viking Hotel!"

"My father was a kind-hearted landlord who lived in this area for a long time, but ever since he passed away, that man has been doing whatever he pleases! There were always rumors he was a good-for-nothing playboy... but he hired thugs from heaven knows where, used his status as a landlord's descendant, and has been making the people of the town do exactly what he says!"

"Wait, I said—"

"A mountain of unbearable sabotage!"

Dorothy jumped onto my bed and stood there defiantly, ranting with her arms akimbo.

"The 'Enoki Mushrooms Growing Everywhere Even in Places I Can't Mention' Incident! The 'Boiling the Cabbage Uncle to Pieces' Incident! And the 'Minotaur Maid' Incident!"

"I told you to wait a second!" I finally called a halt and pulled her down from the bed.

Right after she had guided me to the inn and shown me to my room, Dorothy had started explaining the situation of the town and the inn without any preamble.

At my restraint, she turned her gaze toward me as if noticing my presence for the first time. "...You're interested in what kind of incidents they were, aren't you?"

"No, I mean, I *do* kind of wonder 'What the heck was that,' but... I also feel like I'd lead a happier life if I didn't hear the details. I mean, the titles alone were enough to convey how unpleasant they were."

At my words, her eyes sparkled as if she had found a kindred spirit.

"Right?! As a human being, as one who lives upon this earth, it's unforgivable! It's grounds for erasure! It's a done deal!"

"Listen. It sounds like there's a lot going on, but I'm just a tourist. And this is a local problem. I'll be troubled if you expect too much from me."

"Whaaaat?! But Lina-san, just now you said, 'I find romance in the idea of a random act of violence'!"

"I never said that!! ...Honestly..."

Anyway! I'm going to look around once I've put my luggage down, so shoo! Out you go!

The salt-and-pepper-haired middle-aged guy was preparing the skewers with a beaming smile. "Coming to see the waterfall after all?"

To be honest, I didn't feel like sticking my nose into something so complicated without a commission fee or some kind of payoff.

"Hey, mister. Give me ten."

"Right you are."

I put my luggage down and headed out into the town, ignoring Dorothy, who was still shouting something or other. There was still a little time left before dusk.

It wasn't a very large town, but being a tourist spot, the main street was lined with quite a few stalls. In the very center of the main street, a big white hotel caught my eye. This was likely the hotel owned by the group harassing Dorothy and her mother... but well, I didn't care about that. For now, I'd just buy something tasty-looking at a suitable shop, head to the waterfall while taking a stroll, and spend some time watching the sunset over the water.

After that, I'd go back to the inn for dinner, and if the mood struck me, visiting the falls at night might be fun too. I browsed several stalls before finally stopping in front of one selling lamb and onion skewers. The smell of meat grilling with plenty of salt and pepper was wonderful.

"Well, yeah," I replied.

"It's quite a sight. The view changes between morning and night. Have you already got a room? At the Viking Hotel, perhaps?"

"Mm. A small place called the Cranberry Inn."

"Heh. Well, enjoy yourself."

The man handed over the skewers with a beaming smile. "Here you go, ten of 'em. That'll be one gold coin."

Pfft.

Hearing the price, I reflexively spat out.

"Ah, geez. Spitting all of a sudden. You got spit on them, didn't you? No returns allowed. Now, one gold coin." The man said, his smile never wavering.

"Now wait just a minute!! One gold coin for ten skewers... What's with that price?!"

It was a total rip-off. Even if he was being particular about the ingredients, frankly speaking, it was an outrageous price. But the man didn't panic or flinch; he kept that smile fixed on his face.

"Even if you say that... that's just how it is. You're staying at the Cranberry Inn, right? If you were staying at the Viking Hotel, though..."

Ho-hooooo... I see, I see.

So that was it. Town-wide harassment. They showed no mercy to guests staying anywhere other than the Viking Hotel.

Okay, I got it. Picking up a fight that's been sold to you is the very spirit of a young maiden. I gave a bright, sunny smile.

"I see~♪ If that's how it is, I guess it can't be helped~♪ Just a second, okay? ♡"

I reached into my pocket, chanting a spell under my breath.

Ice Lance!

An arrow of cold appearing at zero distance froze the skewers right along with the man's hand.

Sorry Skewers.

"Wh-wha-wha-wha-wha-wha!!"

To the panicking man, I said with a smiling, wooden delivery:

"In that case, ***ERADICATION***!!"

The Cranberry Inn was that kind of place. On the first floor was the dining room, while the second and third floors were guest rooms.

"Ooh~? I ordered skewers, but they're frozen. I guess I can't pay for these, then~♪ All is right with the world."

I stepped through the front door and walked into the dining room. I had run into the landlady—Dorothy's mother, Melina—during check-in and when I headed out, so my strangely early return must have piqued her interest.

She looked like she hadn't quite reached thirty yet. She had the same black hair as Dorothy, and being mother and daughter, their features were quite similar.

"Oh? Did you forget something?" she asked.

I replied with a twitching smile. "Heh heh heh heh. Nothing. I just got harassed a bit by a stall owner. Probably someone under the thumb of that hotel."

"Really?"

The voice that went up at my words belonged to Dorothy. Apparently, she had been prepping food; she came running from the back of the kitchen, looking up at me with eyes that were strangely sparkling.

"So it happened. It really happened. An incident like that."

Well, putting aside those bizarre incidents for a moment.

"Which means, ***ERADICATION*** is the only way!!"

"Yay!"

Dorothy cheered at my declaration. As I humored her, Melina cut in flusteredly.

"Gue-gue-guest, please wait, please calm down! Dorothy! This girl! How many times do I have to tell you not to egg the guests on! Since it's just a child's talk, please don't take it seriously and stay calm! Peace is best!"

She did this often, didn't she? Dorothy.

At her mother's scolding, the girl puffed out her cheeks. "...But... even Mama was really angry during the 'Minotaur Maid' Incident..."

"...Well... certainly that was a bit extreme, but..."

"Anyway, Melina-san. Don't misunderstand." I waved my hand dismissively at Melina, who was preaching pacifism. "Don't worry about it. Or rather, I'm already involved. But—" I lowered my voice slightly and whispered, "In exchange, if the officials ask later, just tell them, 'The guest was in the house the whole night.'"

"Wait, wait, wait, guest! What on earth are you planning to do!"

Melina turned pale and grew flustered again. She was a restless person.

"No. Even if you ask 'what'..."

I scratched my head, wondering what to do. Dorothy pulled on the hem of my cloak with her small hand and whispered in my ear.

"Guest, I want a development with more impact."

"What is this child saying! That's why I said don't egg her on, Dorothy! If you do any more, Mama's going to cry! Guest, you too! Please, I beg you, don't do anything! Anything that looks like it'll become a big deal!"

She appealed to me with tears in her eyes. *Uwaaaaah*. Despite the daughter, the mother was a total pushover. I had thought for sure she would join Dorothy in egging me on.

Well, in that case... just as I was tilting my head in thought.

An explosion sounded from outside.

Melina’s face instantly turned ghost-white. She suddenly grabbed my collar with a firm grip!

"Wh-wh-wh-what was that sound just now! What did you do, guest?!"

"Was it my fault?! I'm standing right here, there's no way I could have done anything! I don't know! I don't know what happened! ...Anyway! Let's go see!"

"...Y-yes... you're right..."

She let go of me. The three of us huddled together and peeked out from the entrance.

Dusk was approaching the town streets. From the main road—where the stalls were lined up—a single trail of smoke was rising into the sky. From here, other buildings were in the way, so we couldn't tell exactly what had happened.

"Hey, Mama," Dorothy muttered, pointing a finger. "It's flying."

"Eh?"

Melina and I spoke in unison, following the direction of her finger.

There, indeed, wrapped in a barrier of wind, flying at high speed... wait, hey.

After passing through the town street, it changed trajectory and came heading straight for us!

"Heeeeeeee! It's coming this wayyyyy! That's why Mama always says you shouldn't point in cases like this!"

"But, but, Mama! Mama!"

Melina hugged Dorothy hurriedly, letting out a panicked cry. Dorothy cried out in turn.

Once it arrived in front of us, the figure canceled the spell and landed on the ground! It was no wonder Melina was terrified. After all, the appearance was anything but ordinary.

The glossy long black hair was fine, but the costume had an unnecessarily high level of skin exposure, plus spiked shoulder guards! A skull pendant hung from the neck! Camping out would be cold this time of year!

That woman, dressed in an outfit that screamed "complete nonsense," was my self-proclaimed rival who was apparently still alive: Naga the Serpent!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! What a coincidence to meet in a place like this! Lina Inverse! Don't tell me you're here for the waterfall, too?"

"Ah... yeah, something like that."

I gave a half-hearted, lazy reply. From behind me—

"U-um... Lina-san..."

Melina's voice came timidly. "Is she... an acquaintance of yours? That person who looks like her personality is overflowing and spilling over the edge of the bowl...?"

"...Well... yeah..."

I answered that question over my shoulder, my eyes fixed on Naga and the smoke still rising in the distance.

"So, Naga, I want to ask. Was that your doing after all?"

Asked this, she puffed out her chest.

"Hmph! Don't you think that's a fitting end for a crooked stall that tries to charge ten silver coins for a single apple? The word 'divine punishment' exists for moments like this! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

For someone acting so high and mighty, she had apparently fled in a hurry using high-speed flight after doing it... but well, putting that aside.

"By any chance, did the person at the stall ask if you were a guest of the Viking Hotel?"

"Oh? You're well-informed, Lina. Come to speak of it, when I replied that I had no intention of staying in such a tasteless hotel, the man’s face started twitching."

"I thought so."

Whether that hotel was actually tasteless was one thing—but regardless, that seemed to be the situation.

At my murmur, Naga frowned. "What do you mean 'I thought so,' Lina?"

"In this town, right now—!"

The one who spoke up wasn't me. It was Dorothy, who had slipped beside Naga at some point and was looking up at the western sky for no reason.

"The evil Viking Hotel faction, plotting to rule the town, is expanding its influence! Their black, demonic hands are reaching out toward an innocent mother and daughter running an inn! But appearing there is the 'Eradication Duo' who cannot forgive evil!"

The Eradication Duo?

"And so!" Before I could jump in with a retort, Dorothy spun around, looked at the two of us, and said, "To protect the brave mother and daughter, and to defeat the evil hotel, the Eradication Duo sets off immediately! Or rather, please set off! I'll have dinner ready and waiting!"

"That's why I said no, Dorothy! Don't goad the guests!" Melina hugged the take-charge Dorothy, turning frightened eyes toward us. "...U-um... anyway, it's no good talking standing up, so won't you come inside? I can at least serve some tea."

"---Hmph. I see. I've got the gist of the situation."

In the dining room on the first floor of the inn, while sipping the herbal tea we had been served, Naga spoke. Having finished listening to Melina-san’s explanation of the circumstances, she puffed out her chest with an air of self-importance.

"---And?" she said, shifting her gaze toward me. "What do you intend to do, Lina?"

"That’s obvious, ***ERADICATION*** is the—*mgh-fmm!*"

Melina-san quickly smothered Dorothy’s mouth as the girl chimed in from the side with sparkling eyes. Bowing repeatedly, Melina-san pleaded, "Aaah, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry! It’s just child’s talk, so please don't mind it and just stay here in peace, I beg of you!"

"...Well, it certainly is this town’s problem, isn't it?" I said, taking a sip of the tea. A faint, sweet aroma spread through my mouth.

"Y-y-yes, exactly! So after this, you can just—"

"But—"

At my single word, Melina-san's head, which had been nodding vigorously, came to a dead stop.

"They're causing trouble for travelers, too. And besides, their methods are just plain irritating."

"Exactly!" Dorothy added, nodding in agreement as she pried herself loose from Melina-san's grip, clearly feeling vindicated by my words.

"Besides, Mama, your reading of the situation is shallow. This isn't just a problem where we can just suck it up and let it end. What do you think will happen if the Viking Hotel... or rather, its owner, Dylan, monopolizes the inns and everything else in this town? What he'll do next is obvious. He'll take advantage of the monopoly to jack up the room rates and food costs for the guests. Profits will go up temporarily, but that will gradually lower the reputation and tourism value of the town itself. By the time the hotel management realizes how stupid they've been, the town's public reputation will have bottomed out, and it'll be impossible to rebuild. Once a tourist spot loses its reputation, you can't just fix it overnight. If you look at it with a long-term perspective, it's clear this is all harm and no gain."

Whoa, what is this kid?

"So, you see," Dorothy said, giving me and Naga a sunny smile. "I think it's best to have some passing guests who can't be easily traced just go ahead and ***eradicate*** the owner along with everyone else."

"B-but Dorothy, Mama thinks that something as violent as 'eradication' is no good."

"How about a '***PURGE***' then?"

"No, that's also a bit..."

"---Wait a minute."

I called a halt to the bizarre mother-daughter conversation and turned my eyes toward the front entrance. Naga must have sensed it too; she was looking in the same direction. In the sudden silence, footsteps approached—

The door opened.

Standing there with the sunset at their backs were five or six men.

"Good afternoon, everyone at the Cranberry Inn."

The man who stepped forward, speaking with a pretentious tone, was a blond man in his late twenties who stood in the center of the group. He was quite handsome, and his clothes weren't bad, but there was a light in his eyes that seemed to look down on others.

"D-Dylan-san!!!"

Melina-san's voice went frantic again. *Seriously, lady, calm down a little.*

I whispered to Dorothy, "This is him?"

"Yes. Dylan Longhome. Owner of the Viking Hotel," Dorothy whispered back.

I see. He probably came here after following Naga. If he had gone around asking, "Where did that strangely dressed woman who blew up the stall run off to?", he would have found out she entered this place in no time.

Dylan glanced at us once, then turned his gaze back to Melina-san.

"Actually, a moment ago, a stall we have dealings with was attacked by someone passing through."

Without changing her expression for a second, Melina-san pointed right at Naga.

"It was this person."

She sold her out! She sold her out instantly and without hesitation! What a magnificent display of cowardice!

Dylan, the one who was told, actually looked taken aback. "......I... well, if you are going to be that cooperative, I certainly don't mind listening, but..."

"......No, like I said, it's this person—"

"However! In that case!" Dylan raised his voice, cutting off Melina-san as she tried to snitch further. His cheek twitched, his eyes darted around, and he spoke a bit faster. "If you insist you 'don't know,' then I shall take my leave! But my young associates, who

may not believe what you say, might end up doing something rash! Do be careful! Good day!"

".....Um, Dylan-san...!"

Ignoring Melina-san's call, Dylan blurted everything out at once in a loud voice and then hurried away as if he were escaping. The large number of followers followed him in a hurry, looking confused. We were the only ones left behind.

".....What on earth was with Dylan-san...?"

I cleared my throat as Melina-san muttered to herself.

"Well, that's how it is. Those guys got the info that Naga fled here and cooked up a plan. They're going to demand we hand over the person who trashed the stall. Since we know the circumstances, we'd obviously refuse, so he formally 'leaves quietly.' Then he has his people attack the inn later, making it look like the hotheaded guys working for him did it on their own. That's the idea."

"I see." Dorothy nodded sagely. "So even Dylan couldn't have predicted just how much of a pushover Mama would be."

"I wasn't praising her for that. Anyway—" I waved my hand dismissively. "Dylan is pretending he didn't hear her and spoke fast to force the situation back into his own script. So there will probably be an attack tonight."

"Wh-wh-wh-what are we going to do about that?!"

"Strike first and ***eradicate*** them!"

A terrified Melina-san and a fired-up Dorothy. Naga and I looked at each other and gave a small nod. Well, there's no profit in it, but...

"Okay. We'll handle it somehow. But in exchange, make the room and board free, okay? ♡"

Fossude Flourishing Chronicle [Part 2]

"Taking a stroll in the middle of the night... there are some quite refined people out there, aren't there?"

"The same could be said of you."

I kept my body low on the roof of one of the houses and let my voice carry on the night wind. I couldn't see the person's face at this distance and in this darkness, but I could tell that one of the shadows had tipped a black hat—what looked like a silk hat—and given a bow.

"Watching the moon in a place like this is quite elegant indeed."

"If it’s for work, it can't be helped. We're both in the same boat, right?"

At my words, the three men on the ground spread out.

"I suppose so... well then, shall we begin?" The man spoke as if he were reciting a poem. "So as not to stain this beautiful night—"

That was the signal for the start of the battle.

Synopsis

The town of Fossude, a tourist spot for its waterfalls in the mountains. When Lina stopped by, she found a whirlpool of conspiracy! Dylan, the owner of the Viking Hotel and a local landlord, had been harassing the Cranberry Inn, run by the mother-daughter duo Melina and Dorothy, in an attempt to monopolize the tourism business. With Naga's appearance, Lina was dragged into the conflict!

Now, Dylan has sent saboteurs into the night. Lina and the agents face off in the dark streets!

Several glints of light colored the night. Sometimes it was light, sometimes fire, and sometimes the brilliance of ice reflecting the moonlight.

The town slept like the bottom of a lake. Perhaps the residents had noticed the disturbance outside, but no one dared to show their face. In any case, there were four shadows disturbing the silence of the night.

One was me. The remaining three were the assassins—no, the saboteurs—sent by Dylan.

Even if the nature of their job—harassing a rival inn—was petty, their skills were the real deal. They had quick movements and accurate offensive spells.

However, their misfortune was that their opponent was also a professional—and specifically, it was me, Lina Inverse.

Freeze Arrow!

Crack!

After several exchanges of offense and defense, one of my spells froze one of the three men solid.

The man in the silk hat—likely the leader—clicked his tongue and ducked into the shadows. "You're good, young lady. It seems I underestimated you slightly."

My response was:

Dug Brash!

The offensive spell, which pulverized its target with vibrations, shattered the eaves of the roof where a man had been hiding right above me. His footing destroyed, he fell with a scream. I rushed over and delivered a single kick to the back of his head. Once he was completely unconscious, I hid back in the shadows.

"No, no, not at all. Though I can read a feint as obvious as that one."

While the silk-hatted man had been calling out to me to draw my attention, another one had been approaching across the rooftops to launch an attack—that must have been the plan. Unfortunately for them, the guy up top hadn't been able to fully mask his presence.

".....I see....." I said.

A distant explosion sounded again. *Thump!*

Suppressing his hostility behind a mask of composure, the man in the silk hat spoke. "It seems I truly underestimated you far too much."

Before his sentence had even fully finished, the sound of another explosion reached us from a distance. That came from the direction of the Cranberry Inn!

Hearing the sound, a sense of victorious composure seeped into the silk-hatted man's voice. ".....However, we have put a fair amount of thought into this as well. I don't recall saying there were only three of us."

I see. So he had a separate unit attack the Cranberry Inn via a different route. But...

"Then let me ask you—" I began. "Did I ever say I didn't have a separate unit over there?"

The man's silence was thick with genuine shock and the sting of defeat.

Yes. I was the only one lying in wait at this site. Anticipating that they would split their forces, I had left Naga behind at the inn.

"Well, by now, your buddies over there are probably being blown away in spectacular fashion, don't you think?"

The man's fury mingled with the night wind. ".....I see..... it seems tonight is our loss....."

Still stifling his emotions, the man let out a quiet murmur. "I intend to have our return match as soon as possible, so I look forward to your cooperation then."

".....If possible, I'd rather not deal with that."

But by the time I finished saying so, the man's presence had already vanished from the area.

Upon my return, I found the men who had been defeated—likely by Naga's spells. Some were charred, others were frozen solid.

And there stood Melina-san and Dorothy, looking dazed. Naga was standing defiantly atop a wooden crate scattered nearby, letting out a boisterous laugh.

And then there was the blown-up Cranberry Inn.

"---I KNEW IT WAS YOUR FAULT!"

My eyes!

The stone I threw (economy size) struck Naga right in the head as she laughed like an idiot toward the sky.

"Hey, Lina! What was that for, all of a sudden?!"

"Don't 'what was that for' me!"

Naga immediately scrambled up from the ground to protest, but I pointed a sharp finger at the ruins of the blown-up Cranberry Inn.

"You! You blew up the inn along with those guys Dylan sent!"

When I accused her, she frowned sulkily. "It couldn't be helped. The inn just happened to be where I aimed my spell."

"HOW IS THAT LOGICAL?!" I screamed with enough force to burst a blood vessel.

.....Damn it... I'd completely scrubbed it from my memory since she hadn't been around for a while, but now I remembered that this was exactly the kind of person she was. Naga the Serpent.

In other words: she forgets the goal for the sake of the means.

Originally, she was there to protect the inn. But the moment her consciousness shifted toward "I have to defeat the guys who came here," she completely forgot the purpose of "protecting the inn."

In that sense, I was also responsible for leaving Naga at the inn... but if I were to admit that now, Naga would undoubtedly seize the opportunity to ignore her own failure and blame me instead.

Uugh... I had given that silk-hatted guy a sense of defeat earlier, but with this result... I suppose you'd call this winning the battle but losing the war.

At any rate, it couldn't be helped now. I turned toward Melina-san and Dorothy.

"Life has its ups and downs, but no matter what happens, you mustn't give up hope. Well then, on that note..."

I turned on my heels to make a grand exit, but Dorothy's hand gripped my cloak tight.

"Wait!"

"What now? I'm not trying to say something profound just to run away. Besides, it's not over yet."

"It's not over... you mean..."

I turned my eyes toward the Cranberry Inn. This wasn't a level of damage where you could just say it was charred or part of it was broken. It would be faster to tear it down and rebuild than to repair it.

Frankly, I felt like it was already very much "over."

Wait, don't tell me... I looked at Dorothy over my shoulder and asked tentatively. "You're not... going to tell *us* to rebuild it, are you...?"

"Of course not."

Dorothy shook her head firmly, then said with a smile, "I think we should just do the same thing."

While the townspeople and tourists watched us with curious eyes, our party cut across the main street and came to a halt in front of the hotel.

The Viking Hotel. A big white building covered in decorative carvings. It was certainly grand and impressive, but the design sense was a bit unrefined—likely Dylan's taste.

Our members consisted of me and Naga. Plus four men Naga had defeated the night before, whom we had bound with rope and brought along. Melina-san was skulking at the back of the line. And standing proudly at the head of the group was Dorothy, not even ten years old.

"Can I help you?"

Seeing a group like ours, several men who looked like hotel security approached. They were in uniform and spoke politely, but their stern eyes weren't smiling at all.

"No, no, it's nothing, please don't mind us," Melina-san stammered nervously from behind, but Dorothy stood her ground with a smile.

"I have an important message for your manager, Dylan-san, and I'd like you to deliver it. Tell him: 'Violent people have come for a discussion. Would you like to accept the discussion, or would you prefer to have them go on a rampage in front of the hotel and ruin its reputation? Please choose the one you like better.'"

The men looked at each other. They had probably expected a complaint, but they hadn't considered being spoken to like this.

"......Please wait a moment." Eventually, one of the men spoke with a displeased look and ran inside the hotel.

Naturally, that was a blatant threat. *Wow, Dorothy, not bad.*

If she had simply said, "Let us in, or we'll riot," they likely would have just turned us away. However, by phrasing it as a message to be delivered, she misled the guards into thinking it wasn't a decision *they* could make.

And considering Dylan's personality—

"......This way, please..." The man who returned eventually said with a sour face. "The manager will see you."

"I see," Dorothy said with a composed face, and followed the guide into the hotel. We followed behind.

We were led to a room deep inside the hotel. Sitting leisurely at a large round table that took up most of the room was Dylan. Several bodyguards stood behind him.

Among them was the man in the silk hat. I hadn't been able to tell clearly last night—he looked to be in his mid-thirties. He was a man who looked like a pretentious gentleman with a black mustache.

"Well, well, if it isn't the Cranberry Inn. Welcome. Come, please have a seat."

Dylan spoke to Melina-san with a hollow smile. Dorothy pinched her skirt in a bow and sat down directly across from him. Melina-san sat beside her, acting nervous.

"According to what I've heard—" Dylan began after the two were seated. "It seems an unfortunate accident occurred and your inn was destroyed. You have my sympathies. You seem to be in trouble... if you like, I could arrange for the two of you to work here?"

It was nothing but a provocation. Melina-san gaped and looked away, but Dorothy's smile didn't waver.

"Thank you. But before that, there's something we need to discuss." She gestured toward the men Naga and I had brought in bound. "These are the people who attacked us yesterday. That's why things turned out the way they did... but when we listened to their story, they said they were hired by you, Dylan-san."

".....By me?" Dylan feigned ignorance with a blatant frown.

Dorothy gave a wry smile. "Of course, neither I nor Mama believe such a thing. But I'm worried that some of our people might do something rash because they think so."

The composure vanished from Dylan's face.

Those were the exact same words Dylan had said to Melina-san and the others. And Dylan knew exactly what the result of that had been. He must have realized by now: his true opponent in this negotiation wasn't the trembling Melina-san, but this child who wasn't even ten.

"But I think doing something like that would be meaningless," Dorothy continued. "For example, even if our people did something to this hotel, or went to other towns and spread exaggerated rumors about it, it would only end up making this town decline in the end. Of course, I'm telling them they shouldn't do that, but some people might not be convinced."

"....." Dylan remained silent with a bitter expression. He was being outplayed by a child using his own tactics. No wonder he was in a bad mood.

"---So, I think we should settle their feelings and show everyone that we've become friends."

"Ho... and how would we do that?" Dylan asked warily.

"To convince the hotheaded people on both sides, I think a simple method is best. Let's have a competition. If your side wins, Mama and I will work for you for free for

the rest of our lives. If our side wins, then because of your 'poor supervision of your subordinates,' you'll have to rebuild our inn."

"Wha—Wai-wai-wait, Dorothy, work for free for the rest of our lives...!" Melina-san finally spoke up, protesting in a whisper.

But Dorothy didn't even look at her. "Mama, stay quiet."

Melina-san is so weak!

"This is... quite a large gap in what there is to gain, don't you think?" Dylan shrugged and glanced over his shoulder at the silk-hatted man.

The silk-hatted man nodded with his eyes. Dylan turned back to Dorothy. "Very well. It certainly seems best to settle this."

As expected, he agreed. Dorothy's terms weren't fair, but Dylan couldn't simply refuse. Because he knew from the silk-hatted man about my strength and Naga's recklessness. He judged that if he refused the match and let us loose, it would be a huge headache.

Of course, Dylan had no desire to rebuild the Cranberry Inn. That's why he had looked to the silk-hatted man—to ask with his eyes: *Are you confident you can win?*

And the silk-hatted man had answered with his eyes: *I'll show you*.

"Now then, what kind of competition should it be...?"

"---Regarding that—"

The silk-hatted man, who had been silent until now, spoke up, cutting Dylan off. Dylan turned around with a surprised look, as this was clearly unplanned. The silk-hatted man looked him in the eye.

"If it is to satisfy both parties, why not let the people involved decide?"

"Fine."

Though it was phrased as a question, there was a light of determination in the silk-hatted man's eyes that showed he had no intention of backing down. Even as the employer, Dylan couldn't resist the glare of a professional combatant.

".....W... well, that's a reasonable proposal."

"I think that's fine," Dorothy said with a sunny smile.

"I am grateful for your understanding," the man said, then turned his gaze toward me.

I see. A grudge match. Interesting.

"Then how about each side puts forward a few people to 'compete'? Whichever side has everyone retire—either because they lose the 'will to continue' or they are 'unable to continue'—loses. How's that?" I said.

In this context, "compete" naturally meant fight.

The silk-hatted man tipped the brim of his hat slightly with his finger. "Fine."

So, a team battle where the last side standing wins. That's what it came down to.

"From this side, it'll be me, Lina Inverse, and Naga over there. From your side, bring as many as you like."

"And the numbers?"

Even if I limited the numbers, there was no guarantee they would stick to it. In that case, I'd just take care of everyone Dylan hired, from the small fry to the big shots, all at once.

"As many as we like... you're talking big, aren't you?" Dylan gave a wry smile at my proposal. But the silk-hatted man's expression tightened.

"I see. You are that Lina Inverse... no wonder. I've wanted to test myself against someone like you once."

He probably knew my name. But what appeared on his face wasn't fear, but a bold smile.

"Understood. In that case, it would be rude to take you lightly. From our side—if I may be so bold—it will be myself, Flick Gallois, and ten others."

"TEN PEOPLE!"

Melina-san, Dorothy, and Dylan's voices harmonized at Flick's declaration, which could be taken as either cowardly or cautious.

But...

"Okay. That's fine."

I looked him straight in the eye and gave my answer clearly.

The thin moon in the sky wove through the leaves of the trees, casting remnants of light upon the earth. The night air was thick with the scent of melted vegetation, and the voices of insects made the wind vibrate.

Naga and I were currently making our way through the mountains that cradled the town of Fossude. This location had been chosen as the stage for our battlefield—or rather, the "competition." We couldn't exactly fight in the middle of town, so it was decided the matter would be settled in the mountains during the dead of night.

Each side entered the mountains from different points to find and take down the opponent. Ambushing was perfectly fine, of course, but just because you waited didn't mean the enemy would show up. If both sides had opted for an ambush plan, we'd all be living as mountain hermits for the rest of our lives.

In an open area, one could use a flight spell to search from the sky, but between the trees and the darkness, that trick was useless now.

"We aren't familiar with the terrain around here, so watch your step, Naga," I said as we advanced through the dark.

Naga, however, just snorted at my words.

"Hmph. Who do you think you are talking to? Do you really think a slight geographical advantage means anything to Naga the Serpent?!"

"No, I'm not talking about a geographical advantage. I mean you're likely to get carried away in the middle of a fight, slip, and tumble off a cliff."

"It's fine! That only happens once every two days at most!"

Does this woman lose her footing on a cliff every forty-eight hours?

Well, knowing Naga, she definitely would. Actually, I found myself thinking it might be better if she just fell off a cliff and disappeared now; it would certainly reduce the number of unpredictable variables. Just as that thought crossed my mind...

We both stopped at the same time. We sensed it. A presence approaching us.

"Naga, you take them head-on. With your strength, it should be more than enough. I'll hang back and poke at them from the side."

"Hmph. Understood!"

Waiting for Naga's reply, I moved off to the flank. My plan was to use Naga as a decoy while I swept in and took all the credit—but it's all in how you word it. Apparently, Naga didn't catch on. I hid myself in the shadows of the trees a short distance away.

Soon, several shadows bled out from the depths of the darkness created by the night and the forest.

Naga, of course, didn't flinch. With her hands on her hips and her chest puffed out, she glared at the approaching shadows. It wasn't just one or two people. I didn't know the exact count, but if that silk-hatted man, Flick, had been telling the truth about there being around eleven of them, then this was likely almost all of them. They must have heard us talking and closed in. We were certainly at a disadvantage in terms of numbers, but I didn't mind getting things over with quickly.

"Hmph! These...!"

BOOOOOM!

Cutting off Naga's voice, an explosion that swallowed the entire area occurred without warning!

A flash painted the night white, and the blast wave sent my hair and cloak fluttering. If I hadn't been hiding behind the trees, I wouldn't have escaped unscathed. After the light faded, Naga and the men were all blown away and knocked flat.

".....I see....."

A low laugh echoed through the surroundings. The man in the silk hat, Flick Gallois, emerged from the darkness.

".....No way....." I muttered reflexively as I looked over the carnage.

Flick replied in a voice laced with a smile, "'No way'? What do you mean by that? Surely you aren't going to say something as naive as, 'How could you blow up your own allies along with your opponent?'"

Of course not. I was just surprised that someone else was thinking the exact same thing as me: blowing up Naga and the enemies all together in one go. Well, I wasn't about to say that out loud.

Keeping an eye on my surroundings, I slowly stepped out from the shadows.

"....Heh heh heh.... It seems you are not one to be handled easily. However, I didn't expect you to divide your forces."

Flick's form sank back into the darkness. I kicked off the ground and retreated into the shadows of the trees as well, chanting a spell under my breath.

"It is a shame I couldn't finish you with that last blow... but no matter."

His voice sounded like a streak of cold air. I sharpened my ears and nerves, searching for his sound and presence amidst the faint rustle of the undergrowth and the night wind.

A spark of murderous intent.

I dashed and leaped to the side. A burst of flame erupted exactly where I had been standing a moment ago. Blending it into the darkness, I unleashed the spell I had been chanting! I aimed for the spot where the killing intent originated, but the strike met no resistance, merely passing through empty space and snapping the trees behind it.

"---If you do something that flashy and start a forest fire, won't your employer give you an earful?" I called out.

"I don't care about that! If I'm known as the man who defeated Lina Inverse, there will be plenty of other places willing to hire me!"

Dug Brash!

Flick's voice rang out alongside the explosive sound. I see—so rather than loyalty to Dylan, he wanted to make a name for himself by taking me down. In that case, he was going to come at me with reckless, indiscriminate attacks. That meant I couldn't hold back either.

I couldn't see him, hidden in the dark. I had to rely on sound and presence. But the same was true for him. However, there was one advantage I had.

Flick and I searched for each other's positions. Suddenly, another sound and presence appeared!

I felt Flick's blatant hesitation. Then...

BOOOOM!

Flick detonated an attack spell toward the new presence. An explosion and a scream rang out, and the presence vanished, but Flick’s confusion remained.

Now I know exactly where you are! I fired the attack spell I had been chanting toward his location.

Dill Brand!

The branches of the trees groaned and the leaves were scattered as a burst of high-pressure wind exploded. Even if Flick had let out a scream, it wouldn't have reached my ears. A wind spell like that is almost impossible to dodge.

However, Flick's presence was still there. Had he blocked it with some spell? Or had the trees created turbulence in the wind, luckily reducing the damage? Regardless, I began chanting the next spell.

Then, that sound and presence appeared again.

"Damn it! What is this?!" he spat out, practically screaming.

He fired another attack spell toward it. An explosion. A scream. The presence vanished. But...

Footsteps and a presence moved away. He was completely confused now. And no wonder—a presence and a sound that wasn't mine kept appearing out of nowhere.

To be honest, it was just Naga. She would recover from the damage, stand up, and immediately get blown away again before losing consciousness once more—it was just a cycle of her nonsensical recovery speed. To someone who didn't know her, what was happening was a phenomenon that defied all understanding. Naturally, he was shaken.

And that hesitation was the opening I needed!

Dill Brand!

I unleashed the same spell again. The wind exploded with a roar. But there was likely little damage to the opponent. Almost the instant I fired the spell, he had suddenly turned tail and run.

This was bad. The condition for victory was the total elimination of one side, and he had the geographical advantage. If I lost sight of him now, it would be difficult to find him again.

I kicked the earth and chased after the retreating footsteps and presence. We scrambled up slopes and dashed through the grass. He fired occasional warning shots with attack spells, but most missed without me even having to dodge.

After running for a while, another sound began to mingle with the footsteps on the grass. The sound of a waterfall.

I see. He intended to use the roar to mask his footsteps. Honestly, that was a pain. I could follow him by presence alone, but even that has its limits. If I lost him, things would get messy.

I pushed my tired legs harder, but he was desperate too. The distance wouldn't close. As we ran, the sound of the waterfall grew louder and louder until it was practically deafening.

Suddenly, the view opened up. The man stood atop a cliff where the bare earth was exposed. It looked as though he had accidentally run into a dead end and finally resigned himself to his fate.

But my intuition rang an alarm bell. He was still planning something.

So, what? I racked my brain. What was here that hadn't been at the previous location? The waterfall and the cliff. Because of the waterfall, I couldn't hear anything except the crashing water. If Flick were chanting a spell right now, I wouldn't be able to hear it. Why did he have to lead me *here*? What spell would he chant?

The answer that surfaced sent a shiver down my spine.

Dals Phoke.

The mouth of the waterfall was right behind him. The river, reflecting the faint moonlight, fell from the cliff, scattering silver brilliance into the darkness. Flick stopped there and turned toward me.

It was an attack spell that used water, cutting through it like a sharp blade. It belonged to the category of Black Magic and could easily slice through even a rocky mountain. However, to use this spell, a large amount of water had to be nearby. That condition was now met.

If he fired such a spell parallel to the ground, it would be extremely difficult to dodge. I had to stop his incantation! However, attack spells with short casting times have low destructive power or are easily avoided. And if he was indeed chanting *Dals Phoke*, the magical barrier generated during the incantation would likely block low-power spells.

In that case, there was only one move! I chanted the spell at high speed.

Vraimer Phimos!

It was a spell to interfere with the earth spirits and create a stone doll—a Golem. But of course, my aim wasn't to use the Golem as a shield.

The earth surged and shifted, attempting to form a giant humanoid shape. Naturally, dirt and rock were stripped away from the ground to compensate. A crack raced through the earth.

The next moment, the cliff could no longer support its own weight. It crumbled, sending Flick plummeting toward the waterfall basin along with the collapsing ledge.

Mornings came early in Fossude.

Perhaps because it faced the east, the sky was already beginning to brighten by the time I descended to the bottom with a *Levitation* spell, pulled out Flick (who was bobbing up and down in the basin), tied him up, and gagged him.

And then—

"Lina-san!"

Dorothy's voice reached me, piercing through the roar of the falls. They must have heard the sounds of battle and come to investigate. Melina-san, Dorothy, Dylan, and his followers were all there. I gave them a V-sign for victory.

Realizing his defeat, Dylan turned pale. Melina-san, perhaps out of relief or exhaustion, sank to her knees on the spot. I walked over until I was close enough that the waterfall wouldn't drown out my voice.

"It's just as you see," I declared.

".....What do you mean, 'just as you see'!" Dylan barked, clearly unwilling to accept his loss. "Look at what you've done...!"

"What are you talking about? if you didn't want your henchmen getting counter-attacked, you shouldn't have picked a fight in the first place."

"Who's talking about Flick! You know this town survives on waterfall tourism! Fossude is finished!"

Huh?

I looked back over my shoulder tentatively. The top cliff had collapsed, and the falling rocks had presumably smashed into things on the way down. The scenic beauty of the falls... was pretty much ruined.

Come to think of it, Melina-san didn't look relieved; she looked like she was in a trance, muttering something with hollow eyes.

...Uh, does this mean it's wiser to just run away while pretending I don't know anything?

"Hey, Mama, pull yourself together!" Dorothy said, shaking Melina-san's shoulder. "We won the bet, so the Cranberry Inn will be rebuilt!"

".....Dorothy-kun..... it doesn't matter anymore..... it's no use..... there's nothing we can do....." Dylan said in an exhausted voice.

But Dorothy looked at him with an exasperated expression. "What are you talking about? The answer to what we should do is right in front of us."

She turned her gaze toward the Golem standing atop the cliff.

The reconstruction of the Cranberry Inn began that very day. Of course, as promised, Dylan covered the entire cost. And he likely wouldn't be harassing the Cranberry Inn anymore. If anything, he seemed to have taken a real liking to Dorothy because of this whole ordeal.

Even now, tourists come to the waterfall to look at the view.

Local people who are used to the sight might have felt that the waterfall looked slightly different than usual. However, if you didn't know any better, you probably wouldn't even notice that repair work had been performed on the falls.

I created Golems in the exact shape of the missing sections of the cliff and commanded them.

"Stay stuck right there forever."

That was the repair plan Dorothy had devised.

The moment the repairs were finished, Dylan suddenly did a complete about-face and began singing Dorothy's praises. Beyond his gratitude for saving the landmark that served as the town's source of revenue, he seemed to have fallen for her prowess as a businesswoman—specifically her ingenuity and negotiation skills.

By the end, he was even huffing with newfound ambition, declaring things like, "With our organizational power and Dorothy's talent, we can make this town prosper even more and possibly even expand our business to other regions!"

...Well... I just hope he doesn't awaken to some strange lolicon “hobby” or something...

Anyway, as a result of all this.

The following day, when I departed the town, a strange turn of events saw Melina-san and Dorothy joined by Dylan—and even a reluctant Flick—to see me off. With the group behind me sending me off in a surprisingly peaceful atmosphere, I had only one wish as I walked away.

I prayed in my heart that Naga—whom I had left behind in the mountains and was surely still lost somewhere—wouldn't come chasing after me in a rage.

And so, I left the town of Fossude behind—

(Fossude Flourishing Chronicle: The End)

G-Hunter Volks [Part 1]

The ruins of the old castle were draped in the colors of the night.

The moon was in the sky. A cold, white, faint light. But the site of the ancient castle, now nothing more than rubble, sank into the night and birthed shadows. Something was there.

---When you continue a journey without a specific destination like I do, you often end up having to camp out.

For example: you set off because you heard there was a village "just a little further" away, but their idea of "just a little" and yours are completely different, or there is a village but no inn, or the story that a village existed at all was just a rumor... The reasons are endless, but in any case, after various things happened that day, I was camping out in the middle of a nameless mountain.

That was when it happened. A presence appeared from deep within the darkness.

It probably came drawn to the light of the campfire. Judging by the presence, it wasn't human. I remained still, watching the fire, and began chanting a spell under my breath.

Gyugyui!

The menacing cry came from behind me. In an instant, I spun around as if spring-loaded and unleashed the spell toward the shadow emerging from the debris!

"Icicle Lance!"

Clink!

Taking my spell head-on and turning into an icy statue was a small, human-like creature. This was... what? A goblin...? Just as I thought that.

"---Were you the one who did this?"

The quiet voice and presence came from even further beyond the frozen goblin. It was a man's voice, as quiet as if the night itself had spoken. Emerging from the depths

of the darkness, his form remained a black shadow even under the faint light of the fire.

A black cloak covered his tall frame. Long, flowing black hair. Only his handsome face stood out white against the night.

"Whoa, he looks weak."

I spoke reflexively, and looking closer, I saw he carried a longsword on his back, its hilt and scabbard also black.

".....Don't say that."

The man offered a small rebuttal to my accidental outburst. He stepped forward slowly and then stopped, appearing momentarily confused.

".....A woman..... a mage?"

Seeing my appearance, the man muttered. My current outfit consisted of a bandana on my forehead, a black cloak, and shoulder guards. I had Zenell's Amulets—jeweled charms—fastened here and there, and a short sword at my waist. To anyone looking, I was nothing other than a traveling female mage.

"Something like that," I said.

At my answer, the man shifted his gaze slightly toward the frozen goblin.

"You've done something unnecessary. That was my prey."

"Your prey?"

"Yes." The man stopped at the edge of the ring of light created by the campfire. "My name is Volks Winbard. People call me Goblin Hunter Volks."

Goblin---right. That thing I had just easily frozen with an attack spell.

They are demi-humans with an intelligence level perhaps slightly higher than a monkey, and they usually act in packs. They use simple weapons and tools, and they sometimes attack human villages or towns, raiding fields or stealing livestock.

They are certainly annoying in a group, but basically, they are just vermin with a bit of hair. In a one-on-one fight, they'd probably lose to a large wild boar.

In other words... well... to put it plainly, they're weak.

And if "people call him Goblin Hunter," it means the people around him are basically saying, "The best you can do is handle goblins..."

"Don't misunderstand, woman," Volks said. "I am not just any goblin hunter."

"No, even if you say you're different... I didn't even know such a niche profession as 'goblin hunter' existed in the first place..."

"Look at him." He ignored or missed my murmur and pointed at the frozen goblin. "Do you see that single streak of white hair near the temple? I have been hunting this one for three months."

"......Three months....." I muttered, stunned.

If I went back three months, that was around the time I was firing off attack spells at random in the mountains or on the highways. Has this man really been chasing a single goblin since that long ago?

"He was the leader of a pack of over five, known by local tomato farmers as the 'Silver Gale,' and he was feared. They went too far. The pack he led committed every atrocity imaginable—stealing tomatoes, stealing chickens, stealing cabbage; until finally, we Goblin Hunters were forced to get serious. If I had slain him, I was to finally inherit the title of 'Goblin Slayer' from my master."

".....Uh, well....."

I found myself agonizing over which of the dozens of retorts in my head to say first: like the fact that there's actually a "master" for such a thing, or whether he really, truly wanted a title like that... while I was struggling, he spoke his next line.

"But. The one who defeated him was you, who just happened to be passing by."

"Well, can't we just be flexible about it? Let's just say you were the one who defeated that goblin." I said, having reached the point where I didn't care anymore.

"I cannot do that." He continued, oblivious to the fact that I was starting to feel a bit melancholy. He rejected my half-hearted suggestion. "Stealing the credit of another is something the pride of an honorable Goblin Hunter will not allow. However, it is also

true that I did not foresee such a situation. I'm sorry, but you will have to come with me to the hermitage where my master resides and explain the circumstances."

".....Wait... what? You've got to be kidding! Why should I..."

I reflexively protested his sudden, selfish proposal.

"I won't take up much of your time."

"Even if you say that...!"

He had said he'd been chasing the goblin for three months. That likely meant his master was located quite a distance away. Even if I was just a traveler without a goal, I had no intention of spending dozens of days on something I didn't understand.

"There is no need to worry." The man pointed his right index finger quietly, not at me, but behind me. "There is a village just over this mountain. That's where it is."

"That's close! You're practically a local!"

"Some call me that."

...Which meant it took this man three months to find a single goblin in his own neighborhood.

But well, I had been planning to head in that direction anyway...

"Fine, I guess that's okay... but you'll at least treat me to a delicious meal or something, right?"

"Yes."

Volks nodded solemnly at my question.

We arrived at the village near noon the following day. It was a small village sandwiched between mountains. Looking around, there were maybe twenty or thirty houses in total. Volks headed toward a somewhat large house with earthen walls, located a short distance away from the village proper.

His black cloak fluttered in the mountain wind as we followed the mountain path.

"It's strange," he murmured after we had walked a bit further.

"What is?" I asked.

As far as I could see from here, I didn't see anything particularly odd, nor did I sense any unusual presence...

"My master never neglects his daily training," Volks said, his black eyes fixed on the house. "Normally, this is the time when the neighbors come to complain about the strange shouts from his training. But today, there is no one."

"Well, actually…"

"Let's go."

He didn't even wait for my retort before he started running. He kicked off the grass and headed straight for it.

The front door was open.

The place we entered was a vast room,either it served as a training hall for rainy days, or they simply lacked furniture. At any rate, it was spacious.

A man lay collapsed there.

His build was sturdy, but white was beginning to mix into his black hair. There didn't seem to be any bleeding, but he remained motionless, lying on his side.

Volks rushed to his side and pulled him up into his arms.

At the sound of his voice, the man opened his eyes slightly.

"Volks... is that you...?"

"What happened?"

".....Stolen..... it was taken..... the Goblin Slasher....."

"Goblin Slasher?"

I chimed in from behind, unable to help myself at the suspicious-sounding name. Volks explained while keeping his gaze on his master.

"It is a legendary sword passed down through generations of us Goblin Hunters. In the hands of a true master, a single swing can supposedly slice through the branches of trees."

"Isn't that just a dull blade then...?"

"Who on earth would do such a thing!"

Volks asked, cutting off my murmur—or rather, likely cutting me off on purpose.

".....It was..... Gainas's doing....."

It seemed the culprit was an acquaintance of theirs.

".....And that person?"

The Master-slash-whoever-he-was turned his gaze toward me and asked.

"She is the mage who defeated the 'Silver Gale'."

"What.....! That 'Silver Gale'! Then....."

The Master turned toward me.

"You there..... I beg of you....."

"No."

I found myself replying instantly.

I mean, come on. Why should I have to help with something so incredibly tedious? Unless there was a proper commission fee involved.

".....Ugh..... A commission fee....."

Whether he was in pain or just plain stingy, the Master's face twisted.

"There is no need for that," Volks cut in. "I will surely find him and take it back."

".....But you....."

"Gainas is certainly strong. But I will win."

".....No..... it's not a matter of strength..... it's just that you get lost so easily....."

Volks was left completely speechless by the rebuttal.

"......Uh..... um....."

The Master fumbled for words. I didn't wait for him.

"You were probably going to ask me to help Volks take back that stolen whatever-it-is, right? Like I said, no. I'm not getting involved in something so bothersome for free."

The Master turned his gaze back to me.

"......The Goblin Slasher cannot fall into the hands of others..... As for the fee..... I will find a way..... Long ago..... I found a raw sapphire in the mountains..... Its size is..... about the same as the one on your shoulder guard..... If you succeed..... that will be your reward....."

"Okay!"

A raw stone and a polished gem are two very different stories.

"About the same size as the one on my shoulder guard."

I let myself be fooled by those words.

I had completely lost my motivation by this point. After eating and calming down, I realized a few things.

I had accepted the task in a moment of excitement, but when I thought about it, what the Master offered was strictly a *raw* stone. A raw stone only gains value as a gemstone after it's been cut and polished. While I know magic for such processing, the value changes drastically depending on the clarity, color, and how it's cut.

Even if the raw stone is large, it’s quite common for it to end up tiny after polishing—or worse, to be worthless as a gem. Basically, even if I got a big raw stone, I had no idea how much actual income it would bring in. Depending on the circumstances, the income could be near zero. If I could have at least seen the actual item, I could have made a rough estimate...

However, the fact remained that I had let the words "I'll do it" slip out of my mouth.

I felt like it might be best to just hang around for a while, find a suitable excuse, and drop out. At the very least, I should make a show of helping. So, I decided to strike up a conversation.

"Gainas..... He is a fellow disciple who studied under the same master."

Volks spoke without stopping his pace as he answered my question.

"His skill is genuine. We honed our abilities together, dreaming of one day being promoted from Goblin Hunters to Kobold Hunters."

A promotion, huh. By the way, Kobolds are... well, just think of them as something similar to Goblins.

"But lately, he started harboring strange ambitions."

"What are you saying?"

He glared at me sideways.

"You defeated the 'Silver Gale' easily. To you, a goblin must be nothing more than small fry, unworthy of serious attention. But for those who lead ordinary lives, a pack of goblins is a significant threat and a menace. If everyone decided not to deal with them because they're 'small fry,' who would stop the damage they cause? That is why the existence of Goblin Hunters like us is necessary. There is no shame in our profession."

".....I... I'm sorry....."

Given a perfectly reasonable argument out of nowhere, I found myself apologizing.

He shifted his gaze away.

"Therefore, even if the neighborhood children tease me for being uncool or plain, I don't mind at all. I don't go off and secretly tear up in the shadows."

Whoa. He totally minded.

"But lately, Gainas was different. He said he didn't intend to end his career as a Goblin Hunter. He constantly talked about how he would definitely rise to the top someday."

"And so he aimed for a time when you weren't around to steal the family heirloom sword or whatever it is."

"That would be it."

As we talked, the mountain path, which couldn't even be called a highway, grew increasingly overgrown, becoming more like a game trail.

Of course, we weren't just wandering aimlessly. Gainas would likely try to cash in the stolen sword. We were currently heading in the opposite direction from where I had come, toward a relatively large town. I heard it was a trading hub where various goods gathered. I had only been on this mountain path in the first place because I'd heard rumors of that town and decided to take a shortcut through the mountains.

I heard Volks and Gainas also occasionally visited the town for shopping. So if Gainas was going to trade the sword for money, there was a high possibility he went to that town. Of course, he could have doubled back and gone the other way, but that was where I had come from. We should have run into him. Since we didn't, it was natural to assume he was heading for the town.

".....The problem is whether we can catch up to this Gainas person before he reaches the town," I said as we walked. "I heard it's a fairly large town, so once he gets inside, it'll be a pain to find him. It's also possible that by the time we find him, he'll have already sold the sword....."

"For someone who talks about hurrying, you certainly seemed to spend a lot of time devouring food at our Master's house....."

"That's a separate issue! So, how much further to the town?"

"Any moment now."

Volks said, keeping his eyes fixed straight ahead.

"Any moment now...?"

As we spoke, the path grew even rougher. It was no longer a mountain path; it was a full-blown game trail. Ahead of us was nothing but a series of trees. I didn't get the feeling that the view was about to open up to reveal a large town.

"Don't tell me....."

"I said 'any moment now'."

He repeated himself without looking at me.

"If this is the right path, that is."

"YOU'RE LOST, AREN'T YOU?!"

I clutched my head. Come to think of it, his habit of getting lost had been "guaranteed" by his Master...

Keeping his gaze steady, he spoke.

"A path is not something to be followed. it is something to be carved out by oneself. Those are my Master's words."

"THAT'S THE WRONG TIME TO USE A MAXIM! This is a path you've taken many times, isn't it!"

"Familiarity does not always lead to the correct answer. These are also my Master's words."

"Gaaah! I told you, you're using them in the wrong context! What are we going to do?! Now it's going to be impossible to catch up to Gainas!"

"Can you not use your magic to whisk us to the town...?"

"If I had such a convenient spell, I wouldn't have been camping out last night. I can use a spell to float in the sky, so I can check which way the town is, but the floating spell doesn't have any speed. The spell for high-speed flight can't carry two people over a mountain in one go. I could go ahead alone, but I don't know Gainas's face, and even if I found someone who looked like him, I don't know what the Goblin Slasher looks like. I might get stuck with a fake. In other words, we just have to walk together."

"In that case, this is no time to be standing around talking."

"YOU'RE THE LAST PERSON WHO SHOULD BE SAYING THAT!"

The right hook I threw caught Volks square in the temple.

The name of the town was Thome.

Towns that serve as trading hubs usually have a similar atmosphere. While the selection of goods differs, shops line the streets and stalls crowd the main thoroughfare.

However, there was something slightly unusual about the town of Thome. In the commercial district at the center of town, almost all the paths were covered with roofs. This meant that people who wanted to do business didn't need to bring stalls; they could just bring their cloth and merchandise and spread them out under the roofs. No need to worry about getting wet if it rained.

It was generally popular with both merchants and customers. It was certainly convenient, but naturally, covering the area with roofs made it dark. Of course, there were uncovered sections here and there to let in light, and mages hired by the merchant guild went around casting light spells, but the overall atmosphere was inevitably dim.

And in the particularly dim areas, suspicious shops tended to gather as if it were the most natural thing in the world. This was no different in the town of Thome.

In one corner of the commercial district, on a narrow street, there was a place that felt suspicious just from the atmosphere of the shopkeepers. Overcharging, trading in stolen goods; transactions that couldn't be made public.

It was already nearing dusk when Volks and I arrived there. We figured Gainas would likely use this area if he were to dispose of the sword. Though the odds were high that we were already too late...

"So, what now?"

Volks asked, looking into the dim depths of the street.

".....Well, it's not the kind of thing where you can just ask around and get anywhere. And honestly, the chances of that sword coming back are incredibly low."

"That would be a problem."

"And that's because you got us lost! Well, since it sounds like a hunk of junk anyway, maybe we can just buy a random sword somewhere around here, decorate it up, and use it as a substitute..."

"---Wait!"

Volks cut me off and threw a sharp gaze toward the street ahead.

It was a dim path, cloaked in the approaching dusk. Because it wasn't particularly wide, stalls lined only one side of the road, and the foot traffic was sparse, but even accounting for that, it was strangely quiet.

In the middle of that thinning crowd, a single man stood still in the darkness, staring fixedly at us. He was tall and blond. From this distance and in this light, those were the only features I could make out, but…

".....Gainas.....!"

The name that escaped Volks's lips was that of the man who had made off with the sword.

"That's him!"

"No mistake."

Volks spoke and began to walk. I followed half a step behind. However, the other side must have noticed us as well. I expected him to spin on his heel and bolt, but instead…

He started walking toward us with a leisurely stride!

We both advanced down the street, and it was at the exact same moment that both parties closed the distance and came to a halt.

"On a date? Volks."

Gainas was the first to open his mouth, speaking in a mocking tone. His height was about the same as Volks's, but his sturdy build made him look a size larger. He had straight, strong-willed eyebrows and a square jaw. The seasoned leather breastplate he wore suited him perfectly, without a hint of awkwardness.

"Why?"

"Why, you ask? Ha!"

Gainas laughed through his nose at Volks's question.

"Didn't you hear what I said?! I don't intend to end things like this. I must have told you a dozen times!"

"Even so, to do that to our Master…"

"Don't go making me sound like a villain! I just saw the old man trying to reach for something on a high shelf and kicked the footstool away as a joke! I thought he'd dodge it..... but he went down easily and passed right out!"

.....So that was it, Master. No wonder whenever I asked what happened, all he'd say was "Gainas did it."

"That's when I realized for the first time! It's a waste of time to keep training under a master like that!"

Uhm. I agree with you there, Gainas-kun.

"Even so, that is no logic for stealing the Goblin Slasher."

"Whatever. Think of it as a service fee for all the times he bossed me around like he was someone important."

"Do you really think such an excuse will pass?"

"It'll pass."

The gazes of the two men sparked with friction. Normally in a situation like this, the people nearby would catch the scent of trouble and scramble away in a panic—but for the folks around here, this sort of thing must have been a daily occurrence, as they didn't look particularly bothered.

"Ho."

Volks's eyes narrowed sharply.

"If I want the sword back, I must take it by force. Is that what this is?"

"That's about it."

That was the moment Gainas spoke with a fearless smirk.

"......I see."

Volks began, but…

"Then, ***Damu Brass***!"

I leaned out from behind him and unleashed my attack spell, which blew Gainas away with pathetic ease.

"Yes, yes, sorry about that~"

As I spoke, I skipped past the street vendors—who were finally recoiling—and walked up to the collapsed Gainas. I stopped at a distance where I wouldn't be hit even if he suddenly sprang up. He had taken damage, but he was still conscious; I had avoided a direct hit on purpose.

I looked down at the twitching Gainas and spoke.

"There, I've defeated you by force. Give back the sword."

"......A mage.....?"

"You can tell just by looking, can't you? What did you think I was?"

"......Cowardly."

"Oh, what are you whining about? You said 'by force,' but you never said Volks had to be the one to do it alone. I never said that either. Now, which would you prefer: returning the sword, or having attack spells blasted into you until you do?"

"I... I already sold it.....!"

"What?"

Volks, who had caught up behind me, raised his voice. I, however, didn't even waver.

"Hmm. Well, setting that aside, in the end, which do you prefer: returning the sword, or having attack spells blasted into you until you do?"

"I... I told you.....!"

"You stole someone else's property without a single thought for their circumstances. Therefore, we have no need to consider yours. You stole it. So, you return it. It's a

very simple story. I don't give a damn about your situation, so it doesn't matter if you won't return it or can't return it. I'm going to blast you with attack spells until it's back. Okay?"

"If... If something happens to me, you'll never find out where the sword is!"

He spoke desperately, but I just gave him a sunny smile.

"Even if you're perfectly fine, I don't get the feeling the sword is coming back anyway."

"I... I get it! I'll do something!"

Gainas said in a voice bordering on a scream. Good, that was the phrase I wanted to hear.

"Really?"

"I... even I value my life! I'll..... I'll find a way!"

"I see. Then let's have you 'find a way' immediately. You can stand, right?"

".....N... now?! Right now?!"

"I asked if you could stand."

Gainas seemed to buckle under my silent pressure and managed to stagger to his feet.

"Then, let's go."

Prompted by me, he began walking down the street. Volks and I followed after him. The group turned off the narrow street and entered a back alley where no stalls were lined up. We walked, turned, turned again, and kept going, until I spoke.

"...Stop."

How far had we gone by the time I called out? I addressed Gainas's back as he stopped.

"What?"

"What exactly does it mean to walk down the same path twice?"

Behind me, Volks raised his voice in surprise.

"It’s... it's just your imagination."

Sweat rolled down Gainas's cheek. It was a dim back alley like any other. It had no distinguishing features, and the scenery looked the same no matter how far you went. Indeed, if someone told you it was just your imagination, you might start to believe it.

But I wasn't so easily fooled.

The smell of stew drifting from behind a house we passed earlier. The smell of meat croquettes from the next house. This was the second time we had passed those exact same smells.

"Heh. My imagination, is it?" I said coldly. "Then, the presence of the group surrounding us..... is that my imagination too?"

At the same moment the words left my mouth, several shadows emerged from the darkness...

Next Episode Preview:

Once again, Lina finds herself embroiled in a petty incident! I mean, don't even bother with people like that!

Will Lina and her companion be able to recover the dull "Goblin Slasher"?!

Just how much value does the raw stone she’s supposed to receive actually have?

Well, I don't really care, but!

At any rate, next time: *G-Hunter Volks* [Part 2] (Ending-ish).

Wait for it while taking a nap!

G-Hunter Volks [Part 2]

Synopsis

One day, in the mountains. Lina Inverse encountered a swordsman clad in black, radiating a sharp aura. His name: Goblin Hunter Volks.

The two headed to his Master's home for certain reasons, but what awaited them there was the fallen Master and a shocking truth!

Volks’s fellow disciple, Gainas, had defeated the Master and run off with the secret sword that can slice through even twigs: the Goblin Slasher!

Volks pursues him. Lina, though possessing zero motivation, has no choice but to tag along for the sake of the plot!

Eventually, the two find Gainas in the nearby town of Thome and manage to defeat and capture him, but the sword has already been sold.

Just as they are about to head to the shop, mysterious shadows stand in their way!

"Who are you people?"

Volks's voice echoed through the dim alley. It was a narrow passage, barely wide enough to stretch out both arms. I couldn't tell how many men were blocking us from the front and back, but passing through them would be impossible.

Though, even if the road were wide, I didn't think they’d let us pass quietly. The men didn't open their mouths.

".....You don't even have to ask, do you?"

I was the one who muttered with a wry smile.

"Gainas moved around the same area to buy time. Then these guys showed up. In other words, they're Gainas's allies. Which naturally makes them our enemies. Right?"

I tossed the words at Gainas’s back as he walked ahead of us. He looked back slowly over his shoulder.

"If you think that, then wouldn't it be smarter to turn back now?"

The look in his eyes held the certainty of victory. This was certainly a pinch, if I were just an average mage, that is.

"What are you talking about? There’s a much smarter way to handle this," I said with an air of composure. "I could just beat every single one of these guys, have you reflect on your actions along with them, and then have you offer a sincere apology in a financial form."

The light in Gainas’s eyes wavered. However, the other men, who didn't know my true strength, wordlessly let their hostility swell.

"...Wait a moment."

It was a woman’s voice that rang out, cutting through the growing hostility. As if to welcome the owner of that voice, the men blocking our path moved aside. From beyond the clearing…

A woman walked toward us with an elegant stride, the sound of her heels clicking. The color of her lipstick was a vivid red.

A deep-red dress with a plunging neckline. Black hair tied up to emphasize the nape of her neck. If you looked only at that, she felt like a voluptuous, adult woman..... but she was about the same age and height as me, or perhaps slightly shorter. As for the chest... I might actually have her beat there.

She was a cute girl with slightly drooping eyes, but with that look and that style... to be blunt, she looked like a child trying too hard to act like an adult.

"Whoa, that does not suit her at all."

The men stirred at my accidental remark.

"Wait-wait-wait-wait!"

Gainas hurriedly leaned in close to me and whispered in a low voice.

"That lady is my business associate, Materia Lollingstone-san..... and... well... she’s definitely twenty-five."

"No way!"

"Shh! Your voice is too loud! It’s true. Everyone calls her 'Loli-sis' because of the 'Lollingstone' thing, and they say she's 'cute because she’s trying so hard to act grown up' but..... she’s actually sensitive about it! Have some tact!"

".....I... I see....."

As someone whose height and chest were also a bit on the compact side, I understood that feeling all too well.

Moreover, I had the potential of my future to consider, but if she really was twenty-five, she didn't even have that.

I turned back to her.

"Do you have some business with us? Lady-who-looks-great-in-a-dress."

"Don't try to be tactful now! I heard everything! That just makes me even madder!"

She protested with teary eyes at my attempt to be considerate.

Umu... Whether she was doing it consciously or not, her voice certainly sounded like a proper adult’s, but her appearance was just... Even the gazes of the men standing around her were warm and fuzzy, like grandfathers looking at a granddaughter.

"Ah... I see..."

She cleared her throat with a small *kofun*.

"Let me introduce myself again. I am Materia Lollingstone. I’m something of a kingpin for the antique trade in these parts. And that Gainas over there is a regular customer who often does business with me."

"Well, isn't that a refreshingly blatant way of putting it."

Despite my provocation, she remained composed.

"Well, given the circumstances, I suppose no matter what I say, it'll sound like a transparent lie to you... but we are running a business here."

I see. To translate that into plain English: she ran the local black market, and Gainas was a regular who frequently came by to sell stolen goods he'd swiped from all over.

She gave a small shrug.

"So, from our perspective, a valued customer was getting beaten up and paraded through town. We just came to see what was going on."

"This Gainas stole my Master's sword and sold it. I want it back. That is all."

Volks explained the situation matter-of-factly. But there was no way a crowd like this was going to say, "Oh, is that so?" and just hand the sword over.

"Oh dear... that is a problem."

Just as I expected. Materia made a troubled face, running her hand through her hair.

"It's true I bought a sword from Gainas today... but I had no idea about those circumstances."

"Since you know that now, you can just return it, right?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't work that way, Ms. Lina Inverse. If your family runs a business, I'm sure you understand."

I caught my breath slightly at being addressed by name without having introduced myself.

On my travels from one place to the next, I'd done all sorts of things. For instance, beating up bandits, confiscating their funds to prevent them from starting over, and then using that money to eat and drink in the nearest town. Because of things like that, some unsavory rumors had spread, and my name was known in certain circles. Consequently, there were bound to be people who recognized my face.

However—the fact that my family ran a general store was something almost no one should have known.

"You're well-informed, aren't you? About me, I mean. Are you a fan by any chance?"

"Not exactly."

I said this while hiding my internal agitation. She didn't let her smile waver.

"I may look like this, but I'm quite the reader. I make sure to look through the annual 'Top 100 Dangerous Living Creatures That Can Kill You' every year."

"WAIT A SECOND! Am I listed in a book called 'Top 100 Dangerous Living Creatures That Can Kill You'?!"

"Well... I'll refrain from answering that."

I'M LISTED IN THERE?! And judging by the flow of the conversation, it probably includes an illustration and a detailed commentary! Damn it! Where is the place that publishes that book?! I'll find them and make sure to squeeze a licensing fee out of them!

I was quite concerned about that, but for now, the matter at hand took priority. I managed to pull myself together.

"Regardless of your circumstances, now that you know it's stolen property, I expect you to handle this appropriately."

"Of course I understand that."

To my indirect threat—or rather, my warning—she surprisingly gave a sunny nod.

"I can understand that you are the victims, and that you have a claim to ownership of the sword. However, you must also understand that we, who were sold stolen goods, are also victims. As professionals, we cannot simply return it for nothing. So, how about we meet in the middle? Gainas will buy the sword back from us, and then he'll return it to you for free. I don't think anyone would have a problem with that, would they?"

"Wait-wait-wait a minute, Loli-sis!"

"DON'T CALL ME LOLI-SIS!"

Loli... I mean, Materia, barked at Gainas as he tried to protest.

"This is a mess you caused in the first place! It’s only right that you clean up your own act!"

"Mess... you say..."

"As a decent person, you stole something from someone. As a crook, you hung around the same town after selling the loot instead of making a run for it... listen, just think about it. Whatever the case, you've bungled this. Now, you can either get beaten up by those people, or earn our resentment. Or, you can accept the terms I just offered."

Gainas just stood there in silence, looking miserable.

"Well then. That's settled on our end."

Materia turned her gaze toward Volks this time.

"You don't have a problem with these terms either, do you?"

"No. As long as the sword is returned, there is no problem. Of course, Gainas will have to take appropriate responsibility later."

Volks nodded slightly as he spoke.

This is bad... My instincts as a merchant's daughter rang an alarm bell in my chest. I couldn't say exactly what was wrong, but I didn't like it one bit. We were moving at their pace. There was probably a trap somewhere. But I didn't know what it was.

"It seems we have an agreement then."

Materia nodded with satisfaction. Meanwhile, Gainas remained slumped over.

".....The money I received..... I already..... spent a little of it....."

"That’s fine, that's fine. You can just work hard to make up the difference. For our part, if you pay us 800, we'll hand over the sword."

"WH—?!"

Gainas let out a dumbfounded cry.

"Wait... hold on, Sis! I only received 400!"

"That’s right. Our buying price was 400. The selling price is a special service price of 800. You can just work to earn the rest. If you like, I can even find a job for you?"

"That's... that's impossible!"

"Wait. Isn't doubling the price a bit excessive no matter how you look at it?"

Volks chimed in from the side. But Materia turned a cold gaze toward him.

"Pardon me, but could you stay out of this? You agreed just a moment ago that Gainas would buy the sword back from us and return it to you. If that's the case, how much we make him pay to buy it back is a matter between us and Gainas. It's none of your business. Of course, as far as receiving the sword goes, that's a matter between you and Gainas, so feel free to keep a close eye on him until the sword is returned so he doesn't run away."

...I see... so that's her game...

She divided the problem into "Us and Gainas" and "Gainas and Them," thereby preventing us from interfering with her side. Moreover, Volks, the party involved, had already said "that's fine."

"Heh... well, watching Gainas work while crying might be a bit amusing..."

".....Well, in that case, I guess Gainas just has to work hard and earn the remaining 400-and-change."

"YOU'RE ASKING THE IMPOSSIBLE!"

Gainas screamed at me with teary eyes as I spoke nonchalantly.

"How am I supposed to earn that much money?!"

"What are you talking about? If you just take on a few goblin-slaying jobs, you'll manage somehow. It's only about 400 copper coins."

Almost everyone except me let out a bewildered sound at my words. It was a sound heavily laden with the vibe of: *What is this woman talking about is she delusional?*

I spoke up as well.

"Is it... maybe not copper coins, but silver?"

"Gold."

Materia corrected me instantly.

"WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!"

I screamed reflexively.

"Fo-four hundred or eight hundred GOLD coins?! For just a dull sword?!"

"Haven't you heard?"

Materia frowned at my words.

"It’s certainly a dull blade. But you can't call it just a sword. After all, it's made entirely of Orichalcum."

"WHAT THE HEEEEEEEEEEEELL?!"

I screamed yet again.

Orichalcum. A rare metal that is highly resistant to magic and carries a price that makes people go, "Pure gold? What is that cheap stuff?" If a single sword were made entirely of that Orichalcum... it would certainly have a dull edge, but the price would be astronomical.

But... why on earth did that shabby Master of the Goblin Hunters have a sword like that?

"I won't let you call it expensive. It is, after all, a sword of solid Orichalcum. A wealthy, eccentric noble might pay several times that amount... perhaps even ten times as much. And I'm saying I'll give it priority for a mere 800."

Materia spoke, cutting through my confusion.

Uhm... It was true. If a solid Orichalcum sword was 800 gold coins, it wasn't just a bargain; it was the sale of the century. But of course, I couldn't just accept that.

Her ulterior motive was plain as day. She wanted to use her silver tongue to keep the sword for themselves without picking a fight with me. So, how should I play this?

I racked my brain.

"Wait a minute. You suggested that Gainas buy back the sword and return it to us, but then you set a 400 gold coin difference between the buying price and the buyback

price... Any way you look at it, you clearly have no intention of letting him buy it back."

"I don't know about common sense, but your friend over there is the one who accepted the terms."

She fired back smoothly with a relaxed expression.

Hmph. Hook, line, and sinker.

"Ho-ho. 'I don't know about common sense,' huh? That's a good phrase."

I nodded repeatedly as I spoke, and she gave a small, nervous flinch.

"Then I 'don't know about common sense' either, but the point is we're getting the stolen sword back, okay?"

"Wh... what do you mean by that?"

"Well, for example. Suppose after this, your shop gets blown away and you get seriously injured by an attack spell, and no one knows who fired it. Then, I, who just happened to be passing by, might try some 'uncommon' negotiations, like demanding the sword as a reward for taking you to a doctor. Oh, this is strictly a hypothetical, of course."

The crowd fell silent and recoiled at my "hypothetical" story.

"---Well, such uncommon and terrible negotiations do exist in this world."

Gauging the right moment, I spoke again.

"Which shall we proceed with: a negotiation based on common sense, or an uncommon one?"

".....Fine... I get it..."

Materia gave a small shrug and sighed out her words.

"Then let's both be honest. To be blunt, we don't want to let go of that sword for a mere 800 or 400. But naturally, you want to get back what was stolen."

"That would be about right," I said.

"But Ms. Lina, you're likely just someone hired by that guy or his acquaintance. If that's the case, even if you get the sword back, it won't belong to you, will it?"

"Well... I suppose so..."

I was the one who felt unsettled this time. Even if I recovered the sword, the reward was just a raw sapphire stone of unknown value.

"So, as long as I get the promised reward, there’s no problem, even if the content of the request changes."

"Sorry, but I basically don't accept bribery."

"That’s not what I meant. I mean, the real problem is this."

Materia looked over at Volks.

"I heard a little bit from Gainas. That sword is supposed to be passed down from a Goblin Hunter master to his disciple, right? Gainas said he was the one who inherited it, but..... judging by your age, that would make you a fellow disciple who came to take it back, wouldn't it? Come to think of it, I hadn't even asked for your name yet."

"That is correct. My name is Volks."

"I thought so. So, to you guys, that sword isn't just an expensive or powerful weapon; it's the pride of your school, or perhaps a symbol of legitimacy, right?"

"Something like that."

"And the fact that you came to take it back means you were the one who was supposed to inherit it... am I wrong?"

"Probably." Volks replied.

"So, how about a match?"

I knew of a place where they held little tournaments. We could have you and Gainas fight there.

"If you win, we keep the money Gainas has, but we return the sword. We’ll also hand Gainas over to you. We lose money on the business end in that case, but it can't be helped."

"Conversely, if you lose..... a guy who can't even beat a traitor like that has no right to hold such an important sword, does he? We'll take the money Gainas has, plus 100 gold coins as a tournament entry fee, but you'll have to give up on the sword. Gainas will be turned over to the authorities. In that case, it's just because you lacked the strength."

"Whether you win or lose, it's a matter of your own skill, so Lina-san here won't have any complaints. How about it?"

"Wait, in either case, I'm the one getting kicked around! Me!"

Materia glanced at Gainas, who was shouting with tears in his eyes.

"Oh, shut up. If you lose, you get beaten up by your Master and fellow disciple, and then you go to the slammer. Plus, you'll earn our hostility. Or, you can just do as I say and leave it to me."

"Are you saying I should just leave it to you?"

Of course, I could have refused right here. But Gainas's silence spoke volumes, and she turned her eyes back to Volks.

"So, what will it be? If you don't have the confidence to beat even a traitor, I'd like you to tell me some other good way to resolve this."

"...That's a cheap provocation…"

I felt relieved internally at Volks's calm response.

"...But. Very well."

"WHAAAAAT?!"

I couldn't help but scream at his follow-up answer.

"Wait a second, Volks.....!"

"I will win. That is all there is to it. Besides, as that woman said, if I cannot defeat Gainas here, then I will never be able to grasp the honor of a true Goblin Hunter. If you try to pull any dirty tricks or claim you 'lost' the sword, I will personally hunt you both down. Bring the sword to the venue by the deadline. I will make sure our Master convinces the client to pay the request fee."

Since my client was the Master and not Volks, I had no obligation to help. But ultimately, that would only complicate things further. Plus, no matter how hard I worked, the Orichalcum sword wouldn't become mine anyway.....

".....Fine....."

I gave a small shrug, glared at Materia, and added, "However—to make sure there are no underhanded tricks, I will be Volks's advisor. And you must bring the sword to the venue. The match is set for the day after tomorrow. Is that acceptable?"

"I have no objections."

"It can't be helped."

Volks and I nodded. And thus, it was decided! The two of them, Volks and Gainas, would settle their score with the Orichalcum sword on the line!

The venue was filled with heat and shouting. The size was quite impressive. Guided by Materia’s subordinates, we went down into the basement of a building in a back alley and walked for a while.

"What is this crowd?"

"Isn't it obvious?" I said, walking with Volks through the narrow path for participants that cut through the audience seats and led to the match arena.

"Spectators who are betting on this match."

"Betting? I haven't heard anything about that."

"You didn't notice?"

When someone like Materia says "match," you’d normally realize it’s an underground gambling match. Naturally, she was the bookie. She claimed she would lose money if Gainas lost, but considering the profit from the bets, she wouldn't lose a cent. She had cleverly rigged the terms that way.

"Everyone! Thank you for waiting!"

Materia stepped out onto the circular arena that sat a step higher in the center and raised her voice.

"Our first match today is a grudge match between the brothers who learned the same school but parted ways! In the Red Dragon corner, 'The Slashes' Gainas! In the Blue Beast corner, 'The Gale' Volks!"

She whipped up the crowd with the nicknames she'd made up herself, then raised her left hand, which she had been hiding behind her back. In it was a single sword.

The magical lights scattered around the venue bathed the blade, making it glow with a dull, silver luster. It was about the size of a short sword, a single-edged blade that drew an elegant curve. I had never seen it before, but there was no mistake. That was the Orichalcum sword—the one labeled with the disgraceful name "Goblin Slasher" and kept by a pathetic master!

"And they are betting—this Orichalcum Sword!"

There was a beat after Materia's declaration, then the venue roared like a waterfall.

Uhm. She knows how to hype a crowd, that Materia.

"Weapons are free!"

She pointed around the arena, where all sorts of random weapons like swords, spears, and axes were leaning against the walls.

"You win if you knock your opponent out of the ring or render them combat-incapacitated! If you're going to bet, do it now!"

At Materia's prodding, the customers in the venue began handing their money over to the staff or bookies stationed nearby one after another.

"Well then, that's it!"

Gauging the right moment, Materia raised her voice.

"Both sides, to the stage!"

"OOOOHHHH!"

"Now, choose your weapon!"

At Materia’s signal, both rushed forward. The sound of steel clashing pierced through the cheers. Silver blades glittered like fish scales flickering on the water’s surface as they danced, meeting and separating.

I was already starting to get bored. Volks and Gainas climbed onto the stage. Their skill—truth be told, I knew my way around a sword, which was why I could tell—Gainas was slightly better. But we weren't talking about a high-level contest here. They were both about on par with an average warrior. Gainas was just a bit better. To be honest, even if I fought with just a sword, I could probably beat Gainas with ease.

It was a boring match, to be frank. The only reason the audience was hyped was because they had money on the line. Still, since there was a possibility they might pull some trick, I couldn't take my eyes off the match.

"Unnecessary."

When Materia called for them to pick weapons, Volks said this and drew the single-edged longsword the size of a bastard sword he carried on his back.

"A warrior's sword. I stake everything on this—my own pride."

"Nice line."

Gainas also drew the sword from his waist. This one was the size of a standard longsword.

"Then..... let's begin."

"Battle start!"

Saying that, Gainas dashed across the ground to close the distance, stepping left and right to circle around his opponent while unleashing a flurry of thrusts!

"It’s out! This is it!" Materia screamed. "School secret art: Illusionary Wheel Strike! A forbidden technique that stimulates the one hundred and one vital points in a goblin's body!"

The crowd went wild, caught up in the vibe. Whatever, I don't really care, but why does Materia know about such a weird technique? Maybe she had Gainas explain it to her beforehand to hype up the crowd...

Volks's body swayed once—then he turned back as if nothing had happened.

"It doesn't work. On me."

"Wha... what?! Why?!"

A look of astonishment spread across Gainas's face.

"Because I am not a goblin, so the positions of the vital points are different."

".....Ugh.....! Mistake!"

"It doesn't work! It's not working on 'Gale' Volks! Oh, what an unexpected turn!"

Unexpected? You guys...

"Then it's my turn."

Volks got into a stance with his single-edged longsword and lunged at Gainas! A thudding sound echoed. Materia immediately provided narration.

"It's finally here! The ultimate secret technique: Peerless Enlightenment Strike! To think I would live to see this day! A terrifying technique that destroys the very composition of a goblin's body! Gainas won't be able to stand after this—!?"

Gainas was still standing!

"Sorry, but I'm not a goblin either."

"OOOOOHHHH!"

Again, the audience was swept up in the moment. *No. Let's be calm here, everyone. This match looks boring no matter how you look at it.*

Volks and Gainas stood on the stage, glaring at each other.

"I see..... it seems we both..."

"have made it clear that the techniques we learned from our Master are of no use at all..."

From there, a somewhat standard sword fight began.

Volks began to be pushed back gradually. When it came to this, Volks, whose skill was slightly inferior, was at a disadvantage. It was only by a little, but still... Well, I was

starting to feel like none of this mattered, but from a social standpoint, I was in a position to be cheering for Volks. (Half-heartedly)

"Use more footwork. Stop throwing out big moves so carelessly."

I offered this advice while thinking to myself that if people could actually react exactly as advised, nobody would ever struggle in the first place.

Wait... hold on...

As I watched the match with a listless gaze, I suddenly realized something. Compared to Gainas, Volks was slightly inferior in footwork, and his counter-attacks were riddled with wasted motion. This meant... could it be...?

"Volks!"

I timed my shout for the moment they created distance between each other.

"Throw away your sword!"

"I'll try it!"

He answered, and dashed across the ground!

"What?!"

A voice of astonishment leaked from Gainas's mouth.

Volks unleashed a series of slashes that assaulted Gainas. Gainas tried to deflect and counter, but his blows were easily dodged. Volks's speed had clearly increased compared to a moment ago. Materia was so taken aback by this sudden development that she even forgot to provide her narration.

If one looked at it calmly, Volks was now on even ground or perhaps slightly at an advantage against Gainas. But beyond the actual difference in skill, Volks's sudden power-up brought a psychological tremor to Gainas.

"Oh my, Volks's advisor has made a move! But what does she mean by 'throw away your sword'!?"

"Use this!"

The moment I said it, I drew the short sword from my waist and threw it, aiming for Volks's right hand.

Reflexively, despite boasting about his "pride," Volks didn't hesitate to toss his longsword aside, catching my sword in mid-air.

Before long,

"Whoa!"

Gainas, not even realizing he had been backed into the edge of the stage, lost his footing and tumbled off with a dull, pathetic cry.

"It’s decided."

Volks declared coldly. It was an anti-climactic end to the match. For a moment, the audience seats went silent.

"Wait-wait-wait-wait-wait!"

Materia was the one who raised her voice and stepped onto the stage. She pointed at the sword in Volks's hand and turned toward me.

"That right there, that's cheating!"

"Weapons are free, aren't they? You never said we couldn't switch weapons," I retorted, raising my voice. She narrowed her eyes even further at me.

"Switching is fine! But I'm saying that handing someone a magic weapon is cheating!"

I could understand why she was getting worked up. After all, depending on the outcome of this match, it would be decided whether or not she got her hands on the Orichalcum sword.

But—

"It’s not a magic weapon."

"Don't play dumb! The moment he held that sword, Volks obviously sped up! There's no other answer but that you cast an enhancement spell on it!"

"Actually, there is."

I informed her nonchalantly of the pathetic fact that no one but me had noticed.

"It’s the opposite. He was just slow because he was being swung around by a longsword that didn't fit him. The moment I gave him a short sword that was easy to use, he sped up. Understand?"

Silence.

After a long, long silence—

".....Er..... well..... the winner is Volks."

And thus, the incident surrounding the Orichalcum sword, which had been burdened with such an unfortunate name, came to an end.

Materia, seemingly not wanting to make an enemy of me, kept her word, and the sword was safely returned. Afterward, in town, Volks bought himself a suitable short sword to replace his longsword without a hint of hesitation. Apparently, that longsword was something his Master had forced upon him, telling him, "You should use this because it looks cool."

As for Gainas, after being beaten black and blue by both his Master and Volks, he was happily handed over to the town authorities.

By the way, the raw sapphire I received from the Master as payment was, well... it wasn't so bad that I’d call it trash, but it wasn't good enough to get excited over either. In short, it was just "so-so."

Two days later.

The Master visited me in another village and asked me to capture Volks, who had run off with the Orichalcum sword. Needless to say, I refused immediately.

And they lived happily ever after.

(G-Hunter Volks: Ended)

Descendants of Kindness [Part 1]

If it were her usual self, she would have appeared bursting through the roof of the inn, spinning around while shooting "Mystical Light Beams" from her eyes and letting out her trademark obnoxious laughter!

This had never happened before.

What on earth had happened? Whatever it was, it was certainly an abnormal situation. After all—Naga had appeared without letting out a single burst of idiotic laughter.

It happened when I, Lina Inverse, the traveling mage, was eating lunch at a small eatery that doubled as an inn in a small town. The store door opened quite normally, a shadow flitted across the corner of my vision, and eventually, she sat down across from the table where I was sitting.

Even though there were other empty tables.

When I raised my eyes, thinking *who on earth*, there she was.

Long, black hair. A costume with an absurdly high level of exposure. Spiked shoulder guards and a skull necklace around her neck. Yes, it was none other than my self-proclaimed rival, the Encyclopedia of Strange, the Serpent of the White Snake, Naga.

But something was wrong!

What on earth was this?! What was this silence!? My skin crawled with intense discomfort. It was like a child seeing a cave cricket for the first time.

"...Wha...?! Why are you sitting there normally, Naga?!"

Before I knew it, I had blurted it out.

—Usually, she would have retorted with, "What do you mean by that, Lina Inverse?!"—

She turned her gaze toward me quietly.

"I need help, Lina."

"An impostor!"

"What?!"

Oh. That retort was a little like Naga.

But still, I, Lina Inverse, am not so easily fooled by that level of acting!

"Where are the Mystical Light Beams and the spinning and all that?!"

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I just need you to lend me your strength. Actually..."

As if fearing something, she looked around, leaned in, and lowered her voice.

"Due to a series of events, I unknowingly accepted a request from a pretty dangerous organization."

"A dangerous organization?"

I couldn't help but frown at Naga's words. If Naga—who was already dangerous enough on her own—called them a "dangerous organization," what could it be?

With the color of fear wavering in her eyes, she whispered:

"...An animal protection group."

"Oh, wow."

I could feel my mouth twisting into a frown.

I don't dislike animals. No, I don't mean that in the sense of how they taste or eating them. Fluffy, warm kittens are pretty, and puppies that try their hardest to be affectionate make me want to pat their heads. Therefore, I think animal protection is a fine thing, and there are many organizations doing proper work. However, it is a fact that there are also groups that have gone too far.

People for whom the cuteness of animals is so overwhelming that they can't see anything else at all.

We, the congregation, will not shy away from a mountain of corpses and a river of blood for the sake of Lord Cat.

Such people actually exist. In some cases, they are numerous, their network is wide, and their financial power can be unnecessarily vast. They might even be stronger than the Dils Kingdom Knights.

No, this is just the image I have of them.

And this woman had accepted a request from such a group.

"......Er....."

I squinted, tilted my head, and offered a friendly, beaming smile.

"Um, by any chance, have you mistaken me for someone else? I am just a humble pants-hemming tailor..."

"There's no such thing as such a specific job like that! Why are you suddenly pretending to be someone else, Lina!"

"I am someone else, period! Ah, geez, have a little tact, Naga! Can't you understand the delicate feelings of a maiden who doesn't want to get involved in such things?!"

"It's not a question of whether I understand or not—I'm asking you because I don't want to be the only one who's unhappy, so I want us to be unhappy together!"

"Is that any way to ask for a favor?!"

"Besides, in the first place, it’s your fault for accepting such a request!"

"I couldn't help it! At first, they said, 'We want you to find our puppy, here is your reward,' and they piled up the money... just as I reached for it, they grinned and said, 'You took it, didn't you?'... That was the first time they told me they were an animal protection group. I tried to decline, but they wouldn't listen... so I took the money and escaped when I saw a chance... I don't know when their pursuers will..."

I let out a deep sigh at Naga, who was hanging her head in melancholy.

".....Look, I get it..... their methods are questionable, to say the least, but... you lost the moment you accepted that money without properly listening to the request. Plus, running off with that cash is just..."

"Don't be heartless, just help me. I'll make sure you're well-compensated, of course."

Naga reached into the back of her cloak, pulled out a small leather pouch, and dropped it onto the table with a *thud*.

...That sound.

"This is the advance payment." Naga said firmly.

It wasn't a particularly large bag, but I could tell. I could see it—or rather, feel it. I knew exactly what was packed tight inside that pouch and roughly how much was there. It hit the wooden table with a heavy, satisfying thud; the kind of sound cheap copper or even half-baked silver could never produce.

To confirm it with my own eyes, I reached out a trembling hand and grabbed the drawstring of the bag.

"You took it, didn't you?"

Jolt!

I shuddered at the voice I heard. It wasn't Naga—she had been mimicking the animal protection group's tactics, but that voice had come from right behind me.

Feeling a chill run down my spine, I slowly turned around.

Perched on the backrest of a cheap wooden chair at the table next to mine, I saw a head. A short, blond-haired person was sitting back-to-back with me, a fixed smile plastered on their face.

They turned around with a sharp, *swish*.

".....You took it, didn't you....."

"Eeeeeeeeeeeek?!"

Naga and I both screamed at the exact same time. It was terrifying! What was this?!

As I recoiled, Naga spoke up with a twisted expression.

"Wh-why are you here?!"

Wait, "why are you here"... which means...

"Are you an acquaintance of hers? Naga? Don't tell me...!"

A single bead of sweat trickled down my cheek. The woman stood up from her chair and turned to face us. She looked to be in her late twenties, beautiful and well-dressed, but—while not exactly "sickly," her eyes, mouth, and posture carried an unhealthy aura, like a housewife recently exhausted by her daily grind.

"We are the Raltigue Southern Branch of the World Animal Protection League! We exist not for the sake of animals, but because animals are everything!"

Before I could ask what she meant by "we," everyone in the restaurant—except for Naga and me—stood up in perfect unison with a loud *clatter!*

"Whaaaaaaaaat?!" Naga and I harmonized our shock again.

So, every single one of these people was a member of this "Animal Protection League"!

The woman flashed a triumphant, cat-like smile—or perhaps more snake-like—and pulled something out of her bag.

"I am the Southern Branch Chief of the World Animal Protection League, Nicky Craft!"

She simultaneously slapped something onto her head.

...Cat-ear hairbands.

"Ow."

"Don't say 'ow'! And stop harmonizing your voices with me!"

"......But....."

I caught Naga's eyes. "I feel like that kind of look is only acceptable if you're, like, late teens at the oldest..."

"Silence! This is the proof of animal protection allowed only to branch chiefs! It is a mark of honor, signifying that one has dedicated their body and soul to animal protection to the point of becoming one with them! More importantly—!"

She pointed a finger directly at me.

"You just shoved that bag of gold coins into your pocket, didn't you?"

"Ugh!"

She saw through my god-speed pocketing move!

Nicky Craft smirked. "That money is part of the advance we gave Naga for the request. Since you didn't refuse it and took it for yourself, that constitutes an expression of intent to accept our contract!"

"As if! I'm giving this back!" I said, pulling the leather pouch from my coat and slamming it onto the table. "We're unrelated now! Good day."

I turned on my heel—

"—You swapped it, didn't you?"

Thump! I froze in place.

She was right. As she pointed out, the bag I had just placed on the table was one I always kept hidden in my coat for emergencies, filled to the brim with small, picked-up pebbles. To see through even that... this woman wasn't just a "pain in the neck."

"Now it’s clear you have no intention of returning the money. In other words, our contract is binding."

The circle of customers—no, League members—slowly closed in around us.

It seemed I had gotten myself involved with something I should have avoided at all costs. There was no helping it now... for the moment, I had no choice but to play along.

I raised both hands in a gesture of surrender.

"...Fine. I understand. But first, let us hear the details of this 'request' of yours."

"Very well. Let’s sit, shall we?"

As Nicky suggested, Naga and I sat back down. She took a seat at the table with us, while the League members stood guard around us.

"I'll be blunt," Nicky said, clasping her hands on the table. This environment wasn't exactly one I wanted to stay in for long. "We want you to rescue a dog."

"A dog?"

"Yes. A puppy we were raising disappeared one day. Its name is Kero-chan... and through some investigations, it seems it fell into a hole that opened in our backyard, which led to some underground ruins. I sent some of our members in, but they were attacked by some dangerous creature and came back empty-handed. Of course, I purged those who lacked the proper animal-protection spirit, but..."

"Ugh, I read the punchline," I whispered to Naga.

"Hmph. I thought the same."

Nicky glared at us, clearly displeased. "Let me be clear—our Kero-chan is not a three-headed hound or anything like that. I named her Kero-chan hoping she would grow up to be as healthy and strong as Cerberus, but she's just a regular Chow Chow."

...Then you should have just bought a Cerberus if you wanted a healthy, strong dog from the start, I thought.

"Anyway, even if it's inevitable that the rescue team suffers casualties, it's meaningless if the original goal—saving Kero-chan—isn't achieved. I realized that as soon as the sixth rescue team failed to return. So, I want you to rescue Kero-chan as soon as possible. Understand?"

She pushed a map of the ruins toward us. "I think it's smarter to just go look for her rather than complain, don't you?"

Naga and I exchanged glances. I hated her attitude, but...

"...Fine," I sighed, shrugging.

The damp darkness was filled with the smell of mold spores and decay. The walls, floor, and ceiling, paved with stone, stretched deep into the unknown.

".....What is the meaning of this? You, actually accepting a job so quietly?"

"Hmph. Your intuition is shallow, Naga." I held a magical light above the tip of my short sword to illuminate our path. "Suppose I had insisted on refusing back there. Do you think they're the type to just accept it?"

"True... I don't think so."

"Exactly. It would just lead to trouble. Even if we blasted them away with attack spells, they're an organization. They'd likely keep sending pursuers after us forever.

So, we accept the request, go in, and take a look. If we find the dog easily, great—we get paid, the dog is safe, and maybe we even get a bonus. But if we don't find it..."

"What do you do then?"

"Honestly? We probably won't find it." I sighed. "If they already sent six rescue teams... the odds of that puppy still being alive are slim. At any rate, if we don't find it, we'll just use magic to dig a hole somewhere appropriate and escape. Then, to the Animal Protection League, we'll just be 'those two people who didn't return.' We walk away with the advance as a 'trouble fee.'"

"I see! Hmph! As expected of Lina! Then, let's start digging right around—"

"Wait."

Thwack! I kicked Naga in the back of her head as she started to chant a tunneling spell.

"......What are you doing, Lina?"

"Think, Naga. What's the point of digging a hole and leaving right here at the entrance? They've definitely stationed guards at the entrance to make sure we don't run away. If we try to escape from right here and get caught, what happens? They'll just make us go back in with the guards, and we won't be able to use the same trick again. We have to search for a while, figure out the layout, and then escape from somewhere far enough away."

"......I see. That makes sense."

Naga looked a bit dissatisfied, but she looked down at the map. The map of the ruins wasn't very large. It probably showed where the first rescue team had turned back, which meant the location where they encountered the "dangerous creature."

We walked until we reached the end of the map. Beside the passage, the remains of a rotted wooden door revealed the dark entrance to a room.

I see. So, they were attacked by something inside.

There was a presence in the room. Multiple ones.

Now, what would jump out? Even if it were a few goblins or trolls, they were no match for Naga and me. Vigilance was essential, but there was no need to fear.

Naga and I exchanged glances and nodded in silence.

"Light!"

Naga created a sphere of magical light and tossed it into the room!

The moment it entered!

"Whaaaaaaaah?!"

It wasn't a monster that cried out. It was a chorus of human screams.

Naga and I peeked inside, remaining on guard. It was a relatively large room. At the back, there seemed to be another entrance, but it was blocked off by a barricade of wood and stone.

Illuminated by the magical light, there weren't ten, but twenty or more men crowded inside. They were dressed in armor and weapons, though none of them looked particularly clean.

Under different circumstances, I would have judged them to be bandits using the ruins as a hideout and blasted them without a word, but...

"Calm down!"

At my voice, the men stopped. Scared eyes turned toward us.

"Are you... the rescue team sent by Nicky to save Kero-chan?"

"......Uh....."

"Oh....."

At my words, a choked sob of deep emotion rose from among the men.

"I am.....! I'm Lewis Simon of the Fifth Rescue Team!"

"I'm from the Second Rescue Team!" "Me, too!" "I am!"

They began to identify themselves one after another, but—

"Wait, wait, wait..... hold on a second!"

At my voice, the room fell into absolute silence.

".....Calm down and listen carefully. The request we accepted wasn't for your rescue, it was for the dog's."

"Aaaaaah....."

A collective groan of despair leaked out from them.

"We could have.....! I thought we could finally go home at last....."

"So we weren't forgiven after all.....! It’s still not over! We still can't go home!"

".....Catherine..... If it’s a boy, we’ll name him Joseph, if it’s a girl, Hannah....."

".....The grapes back home must be starting to ripen right about now....."

.....Just how long have these people been down here?

I took a deep breath.

"But there's no need to despair!"

Everyone went silent. Their gazes converged on me once more.

"I can mostly imagine your circumstances. You were sent here by Branch Chief Nicky with orders to protect her pet dog, Kero-chan. But there was something in the way, so you couldn't advance. But if you went back, you’d be purged by Nicky. So, you’ve been huddling together here and somehow getting by… right?"

I took their silence as silent confirmation.

"We were sent here for the same reason. But! I have no intention of letting myself get stuck in a place like this. If you want, you can come with us!"

"B-but.....! There’s a pack of kobolds in these ruins.....!"

"It'll be fine." I nodded at the anxious voice raised by one of the men.

Kobolds. They were basically little more than hair-covered, small humanoid pests. They possessed a low level of intelligence, used simple weapons, and had a habit of acting in groups. To ordinary people who didn't know how to fight, they were a significant threat, but…

"We may look like this, but..... well, as you can see, we're mages. You can leave a pack of kobolds to us. It's nothing to worry about."

Under these circumstances, I couldn't rely on my internal clock at all. Fortunately, some of the men who followed us had mapping skills and tools. If I were to believe them, we had long since cleared Nicky's house at the edge of town and were supposed to be nearing the mid-slope of the mountain behind it, or rather, the area beneath it.

Following my confident assertion, the men tentatively began to follow us. On the way here, fortunately, we hadn't encountered any kobolds or other creatures.

"Uhm, that's not what I meant, but..... if we encounter them, the kobolds are a rare breed with white fur under their necks..... so, you know, I thought it might be better to protect them rather than kill them."

"Hmph. Well, I suppose so." Naga answered calmly, then began to chant.

"Earth Spirit Road!"

She placed her hand on the wall and released the "Words of Power." Simultaneously, the dirt and sand ahead vanished, and a tunnel shaped like an upward slope appeared. It wasn't large enough for a grown man to stand in, but it was just big enough for a large man to crawl through on all fours. It wouldn't pierce all the way to the surface in one go, but if we repeated it, we would get there eventually.

"Everyone, please follow me. If you're the type who would rather die here than see a rare kobold get beaten up, please stay behind. If not, let's go. Naga."

We exchanged glances and nods, then Naga and I turned our backs on the room and began moving forward through the passage.

I felt a prickling sensation on my back. I kept up my composure while standing there, surrounded by the darkness that the magical light couldn't reach.

The presence was there. A quiet hostility.

It was likely the kobolds in question. Only Naga and I had noticed it so far. I hadn't spoken up to prevent a panic. It would be a hassle if this many people started running around in a chaotic frenzy. Why they hadn't attacked yet was a mystery. Were they just afraid of the magical light? Or was there another reason?

Under the tension, Naga’s voice rang out as more of the men crawled into the tunnel. This process repeated two, three times—

That was when it happened! The presence behind me wavered!

They were waiting for more than half of the group to enter the tunnel! They seemed to have a bit of wit, but they weren't the only ones doing the waiting!

Before the wavering presence could fully manifest as clear killing intent and a physical form, I slammed my hand against the nearby wall and unleashed the spell I had been chanting!

"Ice Cave Vine!"

The spiral of cold air I released froze everything in an instant.

Gyagwoooo!

Multiple pained cries echoed from the depths of the darkness. Those were, without a doubt, the voices of kobolds. Several of them must have been incapacitated by that. I couldn't see them from here, but,

"Wh-what was that?!"

"Ah. Something definitely cried out, didn't it? Anyway, don't worry about it, just stay calm and keep moving."

I urged the trembling men along with a carefree voice. They followed obediently, though they looked suspicious. As for the kobolds behind us, the presence was gone. They must have retreated. Realizing they had no opening and were up against an opponent they couldn't beat, they had left.

Cowardly? Or perhaps just good at knowing when to quit? Of course, there was a possibility they’d come back, but either way, now was our chance. Naga chanted, the men entered the tunnel, and there was no sign of the kobolds.

Eventually, even the last man crawled into the tunnel. Only a beginner would breathe a sigh of relief here. If the kobolds hadn't fully retreated and were waiting in the shadows for a chance to strike, this was the moment they would choose. The moment I crawled into the tunnel and became unable to move.

…Well, I wasn't sure if kobolds had that much wisdom, but it was better to be cautious.

I entered the tunnel feet-first, keeping my hands on the ground and crawling backward. Since I was moving backward up a slope, it was incredibly difficult to move, but... for whatever reason, the kobolds showed no signs of making a move. Perhaps they sensed our caution, or perhaps I was just overthinking it.

As I crawled through the long tunnel, I felt a breeze from behind.

The tunnel pierced through!

I crawled further. Eventually, light shone into the tunnel, and my outstretched feet touched grass.

I was out!

"—*Phew!*"

I let out a huge sigh and sprang to my feet.

"Welcome back. It seems that’s everyone."

The greeting was one of gratitude, but the voice was filled with anger and irony. We were indeed around the mid-slope of the mountain. Through the gaps in the sparse trees, the light of the setting sun shone down.

In the shadows cast by the trees on the mountainside, there were far more people than I had expected.

"......We’ve been had..... Lina....." Naga groaned in despair.

Including us, there were about twenty people who had just come out of the tunnel. Surrounding us were dozens of men and women. And standing directly in front of me was a woman wearing a cat-ear hairband.

"But..... you idiots. Did you really think you could get away?"

The woman, the Southern Branch Chief of the World Animal Protection League, Nicky Craft, a woman of a certain age wearing cat ears, flashed a sinister smile.

Next Episode Preview:

(Apparently, they intend to continue.)

The heart that loves animals. It is certainly something to be respected.

For example, like some novelist who always keeps dried sardines in their back pocket, making their shirts and towels smell like fish. They boast that the wounds from their beloved cats don't hurt. To that degree, it’s normal.

...It is normal, right?

Anyway, at any rate.

Does excessive attachment call for misfortune?

How will Lina and the others confront Nicky’s obsession?

Next time: "Descendants of Kindness" Part 2.

Wait for it while grooming yourself!

Synopsis

Is it a demon's trick or the malice of fate?

For certain reasons, Lina and Naga accepted a request from Animal Protection League Branch Chief Nicky. They were forced to dive into underground ruins to rescue Kero-chan, Nicky's pet Chow Chow that had fallen into the ruins.

However, the two had zero motivation. Together with the members of the previous rescue teams they met along the way, they attempted to escape.

The Descendants of Kindness [Part 2]

Amidst the lurking presence of kobolds, they finally reached the surface—but waiting for them was Nicky, wearing cat ears, along with all her followers!

The encirclement could not be broken.

Of course, if it had just been me and Naga, there would have been the option of a reckless frontal breakthrough without considering the consequences. But that was a ridiculous request for everyone else, who had been weakened physically by spending days underground. If we were caught, we would just be thrown back into the depths.

Nicky boasted triumphantly.

"Honestly, I expected you to try and escape."

"But it wasn't a given that you'd come crawling out of the same hole you went into. So, I stationed people all around the mountain behind the house to keep watch."

Wow, so you'd go that far, lady.

The ring of encirclement formed by Nicky and her subordinates slowly, steadily tightened.

Well then—

".....Ah. I don't really know what you're talking about, but..... that's perfect timing, Nicky. I was just on my way to get you."

"Eh?"

At my cheerful response, everyone let out voices of astonishment.

"To get me?"

To her skeptical question, I nodded deeply.

"Yes. Down there, there was a dog that looked just like your pet, Kero-chan."

"What did you say!"

"Hold on, Lina, what are you talking about? Where on earth was something like that?"

Nicky leaned forward and raised her voice, and Naga, who wasn't exactly known for her tact, muttered in the background.

But I remained cool and collected.

"Ah. Naga was at the front of the line, so she might not have seen it. But I was at the very back..... so I saw it. At the back of the line."

".....That's a lie."

Nicky cut me off flatly.

Of course, it was a lie.

"Besides, if you really saw it, why didn't you bring it with you?"

But I remained cool and collected.

"Well, I mean..... The whole area was packed solid with Chow Chows, so I couldn't tell which one was Kero-chan!"

"Don't give me that lieeeee!"

"It's the truuuuuuuuuth!"

To the fuming Nicky, I raised my voice even louder.

"In what world does an underground ruin exist that's packed solid with Chow Chows!"

"Well, it can't be helped, because there *is* an underground ruin packed solid with Chow Chows in this world!"

"Proof that it was there?"

"Proof that it *wasn't* there?"

"Stop talking back like a child!"

"No matter how you retort, the facts are the facts!"

"Hah! Not even worth listening to!"

"Even though this is a conversation regarding the safety of a cute puppy?"

"Safety? Don't make me laugh! If that story were even remotely true, you should have just caught them all!"

"I thought about that, too, but..... it’s impossible for just me and Naga. And the others I brought up are already at their physical limits, so it’s impossible for them, too."

"Then you should have just brought one back! And if Kero-chan was among them, then that's the end of it!"

"That's why..... it’s even more of a bother. If I had caught some, they would have just become overly wary, and the rest would have escaped. And honestly, I don't want to go back down into a place like that. I assume you don't intend to say that you'd rather I stay here than do that, do you?"

I pressed the attack without delay.

"You aren't saying that you 'don't want to go down into a place like that,' are you? Your love for animals is only that shallow?"

Nicky recoiled.

"......!"

It must have hurt. I pressed on, questioning whether that was the extent of her love for animals. I was asking her, as the Branch Chief of the Animal Protection League, if she was really going to say she wouldn't go down there, even when people were telling her, "If you have love, go find them yourself."

"......What a pathetic provocation. Who would fall for such a…"

"We should go."

The voice came from an unexpected place.

It was from one of the people I had assumed were just her entourage, standing right nearby. A bearded, middle-aged guy. Probably in his late thirties. Black hair, black beard.

On the chest of the yellow shirt he wore under his jacket, the words "Animal Protection" were written in red.

"......Did you say something? Vice Branch Chief?"

Vice Branch Chief?

The man looked her straight in the eye and stood his ground.

"I said we should go, Branch Chief. I'll say this while I have the chance, but there are many who are dissatisfied with your methods, myself included."

"Dissatisfied? What could you possibly be dissatisfied about?"

To the arrogant and insufferable Nicky, the Vice Branch Chief poured his resolve into his gaze.

"What do you mean by this team's policy that the protection priority level for dogs is higher than for cats!?"

"That's the reason!?"

"It is a matter of importance!"

Nice one, old man, say more! There's actually a sane person here!

I couldn't help but interject from the side. The Vice Branch Chief kept his eyes fixed on Nicky.

Well..... it seems convenient for me if this "Vice Branch Chief" guy does his best here, so I'll stay quiet and watch for a while.

Nicky, being challenged, didn't panic or make a fuss.

"But I just like dogs better," she blurted out with incredible ease.

"With that attitude, the cat ears are crying!"

"Actually, I'd rather wear dog ears or a dog nose than cat ears!"

So you want to wear them.

"But I have no choice! This is the official uniform of the League Branch Chief!"

It's an official uniform. That thing.

"I’ll tell you this: ninety-nine point nine percent of humanity likes cats!"

The Vice Branch Chief stated this absurd claim flatly, then grabbed the shoulder of a young member nearby.

"If it were a cat that had fallen into the ruins, I wouldn't mind risking my life to save it. Sending in members by the dozen would be fine, too. But.....! Sending friends into dangerous ruins just to save one dog..... that is wrong!"

"You feel the same, right!?"

Calling the traditional cat ears "that thing" was a bold move.

"I..... I prefer capybaras....."

"Shut up, you brat!"

The Vice Branch Chief pushed him away and faced Nicky once again.

"If it were me, and a cat had fallen into the ruins, I would have descended into the ruins myself. But you, even though it was the dog you had been keeping, you only gave orders to others. If that's the case, as that female mage over there said, there's no helping it if it's judged that you lack love."

Nicky shifted her gaze slightly.

".....W-well, I want to save Kero-chan myself too, but I'm in a responsible position in the organization, so....."

"Which is more important, the dog or the organization!?"

"....."

Nicky was stumped by the question.

.....The question itself is reasonable, but the premise is all wrong..... these people.....

After a silence that lasted for a while, Nicky finally exhaled a small breath.

".....Fine..... If you're going to go that far, I'll show you just how much I love dogs, and sear it into your eyes! I'll go down there! Into the ruins!"

Under the darkening mountain sky, Nicky Craft declared it loudly and clearly.

And so, we returned. To the path that followed beneath the ground.

The former rescue team members were dismissed on the surface due to their exhaustion. By now, they were likely on their way home.

The ones who came with me and Naga were Nicky, the Vice Branch Chief, and their entourage, a total of less than thirty people. I had about five of them carry tree branches we'd picked up on the surface, with magical light cast on the ends. They were makeshift torches.

The line was formed with me, Nicky, and the Vice Branch Chief at the front, and Naga at the tail end.

Relying on the light of the makeshift torches held by Nicky, we followed my lead into the dim passage. The passage wasn't exactly narrow. But pressure isn't caused by narrowness alone. The damp air. The strange insects fleeing from the ring of light. Excluding me and Naga, who were somewhat used to such places, everyone else was completely unnerved.

The path extended straight, or curved. We turned left and right into branch paths. I wondered how far we had actually gone.

"......There's no way a pack of Chow Chows could be in a place like this....."

The tremor in Nicky's voice was likely not just due to the echo.

"They were there, truly."

I answered nonchalantly.

"Well, they're living things, so they aren't always in the same place, but you're more familiar with their nature and such, aren't you?"

"......It doesn't look like a walking course for Chow Chows to me....."

.....

Whether it was bravado or what, sweat was streaming down her forehead.

"Hmm. If the opponent were a cat, I would have nothing to fear....."

The Vice Branch Chief wiped the sweat from his brow.

"But..... can't we at least do something about this smell....."

.....

While brushing off his grumbling, my gaze was fixed on the path ahead—where the path crossed with a side street. I began to chant a spell quietly under my breath.

And then, right when we approached the crossroads!

"Fireball!"

I unleashed the spell I had been chanting toward the back of the path on the right!

BOOOOM!

The sphere of light I fired shattered when it hit the wall, scattering flames and noise!

"It's an attack! Run!"

Amidst an explosion that rang louder than I had expected, I shouted at the top of my lungs!

The flames and roar in an unfamiliar place, and my declaration of an attack. Almost everyone panicked and started fleeing in different directions: Forward, left, and back the way we came!

At the same time, I bolted into the right path where I had released the blast!

The fireball this time had been an improvised version of the spell, and the power was considerably suppressed. There was a moment of searing heat on my skin, but I didn't care; I ran through it in one breath, and then headed deeper into the passage.

I didn't have a light. If I were to get separated for a moment, it would be difficult for them to find me from over there. That was exactly what I was aiming for.

I would cause chaos, scatter everyone, and in the meantime, I would dig a tunnel to the surface from a suitable location and escape.

Of course, if I took this plan, it meant leaving everyone else behind here..... but well, I'd rather not think about that. They would just have to resign themselves to the bad luck of being members of such an extreme Animal Protection League.

I ran down the road closed off by darkness, chanting a spell under my breath. I had roughly grasped the situation of the surroundings from the light when the fireball had exploded earlier.

In that place, I extended my right hand horizontally. There was a wall there, just about here…

Instead of the sound of my shoes hitting the floor, there was only a hollow darkness.

Bingo.

When I had checked earlier, I had caught a glimpse of a square hole that looked like the entrance to a room.

I drew the short sword at my waist with a *shwing*.

"Light."

I cast the spell I had prepared onto the tip of the blade. The magical light, with a longer duration but reduced brightness, dimly illuminated the surroundings.

It was indeed a large room. The remnants of what used to be furniture lay rotting, and what must have once been a carpet had now absorbed water and turned into something like sticky mud. On the opposite side of the long room was a door leading somewhere else—no, an entrance where a door must have been attached long ago.

Alright. For now, I'll slip out of there, shake everyone off completely—

Just as I thought that and started to step out, a presence appeared behind me.

I turned around. Illuminated by the faint light, standing in the doorway was the bearded middle-aged Vice Branch Chief.

"......Tch! Did you follow me....."

Well, it seemed he was the only one who had followed me. Without a single trace of agitation, he spoke.

"You said it was an attack..... but the opponent?"

"They aren't here right now."

"I see."

Without pursuing it any further, the Vice Branch Chief began walking toward the doorway on the other side. That had been my intention as well, but if I answered honestly here, my plan would be completely exposed.

"Something fled over there. It was surprised by my attack. I think it was a kobold, probably. It would be easier later if I chased it down and defeated it, but..... you wouldn't tell me to protect the kobold, would you?"

"Branch Chief Nicky probably would."

It seemed this guy was easier to talk to than Nicky.

"By the way, you."

After letting his gaze dart around the area, the Vice Branch Chief lowered his voice.

"What do you think of Branch Chief Nicky?"

"What do I think?"

"I mean, do you see her as a person fit to be Branch Chief? Those cat ears actually look better on me. Don't you think?"

No, I certainly don't want to see a middle-aged, bearded guy wearing cat ears—but that wasn't what he meant.

"Come to think of it, you like cats, don't you? Vice Branch Chief?"

I tried to probe him.

"Yes. That is why I want to be chasing cats forever. If so, don't you think it's a form of happiness for someone who likes dogs to keep chasing dogs under the ground on their own?"

.....So that's how it is.

In other words, this guy was plotting to do something about Nicky while she was confused, and become the Branch Chief himself.

And so, the Vice Branch Chief suggested we team up.

Well, I couldn't say it was an honorable way to do things, but I was in full agreement with the direction of wanting to do something about the hopelessly incompetent Nicky. I, for one, was done with being dragged around by a dog-loving, cat-eared woman and crawling through underground ruins forever.

".....I see. I suppose that might be Nicky's sincere wish as well."

For now, I said that and gave a meaningful, sly grin. The Vice Branch Chief grinned back.

"In that case, let’s first secure an escape route…"

That was when a scream echoed through the ruins' passageway.

Well, I had intended to leave everyone behind and escape anyway, but...

"For those who stand at the top of an organization, it is sometimes necessary to make the difficult decision to abandon someone....."

The Vice Branch Chief made a bitter face.

"If possible, I would like to keep any such abandonment to the absolute minimum."

I replied while scratching my cheek.

"Ignoring a scream... that’s a bit hard to sleep with, isn't it....."

We exchanged a wry smile, and then the two of us dashed off. Toward the direction where the scream had come from.

Nothing could be seen in the depths of the passage. The screaming continued intermittently. Whether it was the group that hadn't had a light, or whether they had dropped their makeshift torches by some accident, I didn't know. The voices I heard belonged to several people. It was likely one of the groups that had scattered at the crossroads.

Although some were wounded and confused, there didn't seem to be any dead or seriously injured. My gaze and the Vice Branch Chief's met. Could it be... was it really…

"We were attacked by Kobolds!!!"

We dashed through the crossroads and headed toward the still-audible screams. Before long, at the edge where the light reached, I saw several figures writhing. It was roughly six or seven people from the members who had scattered earlier.

Well, that was fine, but the problem was that the attackers were nowhere to be seen. They must have disappeared into one of the many room entrances or branch paths that opened left and right along the passage, but there was no longer any presence around.

"Are you all right?!" the Vice Branch Chief asked.

"Kobo... Kobo... Kobolds!" one of them managed to spit out, despite stuttering.

"Suddenly! The Kobolds were suddenly there!"

"And where are those guys now!!" I shouted as I asked.

"Th-they ran away! Just a little bit before you guys came!"

.....They ran away? Just because the two of us, me and the Vice Branch Chief, rushed over?

Just as I was frowning, a scream was heard in the ruins once again.

"Everyone, can you move!!!"

".....S-somehow....."

"Me too....."

As they said this one after another, they picked themselves up off the ground.

"Then follow me!"

I said, turned on my heel, and ran. Toward where I heard the voice. I reached the previous crossroads, and the Vice Branch Chief and everyone else followed me,

scanning left and right for direction. They were managing to keep up with me somehow.

Why on earth are the Kobolds in this place? They have some intelligence, but it’s just at the level of using simple tools to act in groups. In fact, I’ve fought Kobolds many times in other places, but their behavioral patterns are extremely simple. Either they let out a war cry and charge in a group, or they decide they can't win and easily run away. That was usually about it.

But the Kobolds here.....
Even when we first escaped from underground, they were doing something like reconnaissance. Well, maybe that was just me overthinking it. But this.....

Attacking a small group, making them scream, luring out someone like me who could "fight," using the terrain to circle around, and attacking another group …it was a brilliant strategy.

Inflicting moderate injuries on a large number of people who couldn't fight and making them a burden to those who could. Maybe they had a very clever leader, or maybe it was just a result of many coincidences piled up... but dismissing it as coincidence and letting your guard down is nothing but stupidity in the midst of a battle.

Either way, there was nothing to do but go, fight, and confirm it with my own eyes. The screams were still audible, but because the sound echoed strangely, which direction was it coming from...?!

But just then, deep in one of the passages, a light flashed for a moment. Was that... the light of an attack spell? There was a passage extending to the right at the end of the road I was running down. Was it here?

Following that, the screams of the inhuman Kobolds rang out, and what rang out even more was inhuman, mocking laughter!

"They ran away quite easily! Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Naga was there, just past the bend.

Naga!

The passage was wider than the span of my arms. Improvised torches were rolling around here and there, dimly illuminating the area. Kicking the floor, I headed toward

that passage, with the Vice Branch Chief and the others following behind. Once again, a flash of light and the cries of Kobolds, followed by that grating mocking laughter.

"Naga! What's the situation?!"

I shouted before I could even see her. Since my opponent was that Naga, if I approached silently, there was a risk of being blown away by an attack spell.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! It’s not your turn, Lina Inverse!"

Naga's voice echoed. It was close. As the echo died down little by little, the voice became clearer.

"The Kobolds were terrified of me, Naga the Serpent of the White Snake....."

Naga was standing firmly in the middle of the passage, and about ten members of the Animal Protection League were standing along the walls to the left and right. A little further down the passage, I could see the figures of Kobolds that had been scorched or frozen. They were small humans with dog heads. To someone who didn't know better, they might be mistaken for werewolves, but compared to werewolves, even though they walked on two legs, their physiques were much closer to four-legged animals than humans. There were probably five or six of them.

But since Naga said they "ran away," there should still be more left.

"Don't let your guard down, Naga! The Kobolds here aren't normal!"

However, my advice wouldn't reach Naga.

"Hmph! What are you saying? They don't look like anything but ordinary Kobolds to me!"

"I'm saying their behavioral patterns aren't normal! It's like they're being commanded by someone....."

"Aren't you overthinking it?"

".....I hope so....."

"Anyway, now that it's come to this, there’s no choice."

The Vice Branch Chief raised his voice. He looked at me and said:

"Forgive me, but could you two use your magic to dig a tunnel back to the surface? You can do that, right?"

That was not a bad judgment.

"Yes." I nodded.

"W-wait a minute, Vice Branch Chief!"

But one of the members raised a voice of protest.

"There are still friends who got separated here! The Branch Chief is still....."

"I know!"

The Vice Branch Chief cut him off.

"However, there are only two people here who can properly handle the enemy. With many injured people, we can't move properly. I am not saying to abandon the others. Even if we are to regroup, it will be easier after moving everyone here to a safe place first."

.....Well, of course, if possible, I'd rather abandon just Nicky.

".....U-understood....."

The member who raised his voice was convinced. The Vice Branch Chief turned to me again and started to open his mouth, when—

Footsteps. Many, many of them. Heading from the direction we came toward us. Everyone looked past the T-junction, and the moment a shadow fell there!

"Explosive Wind Ball!"

Naga's attack spell exploded!

Gughyaaaaaaah!?

The arrow of wind Naga fired pierced the atmosphere and tore through the void, hitting the writhing shadows directly. Simultaneously, Nicky and her group’s screams went up!

Ah, just as I thought. Because they approached Naga without caution. Seeing Nicky and the others blown away, lying on the ground and twitching, Naga frowned in annoyance.

".....Those aren't Kobolds. They’re terribly confusing. How annoying."

"H-how in this world can you say something like that! Ugh... you’re still alive?!"

Nicky, still battered, protested energetically. It was Nicky and more than a dozen of her entourage who had arrived. I suppose that meant all those who had descended were now accounted for.

"Oh, enough! Kero-chan is gone, and I’m getting hit by attack spells! This is a disaster! What are you going to do about this?!"

Naga, the Vice Branch Chief, and I had wanted to escape somehow before regrouping with Nicky, but.....

"Complain to the Kobolds. They’re the ones who attacked."

While clawing at her hair, Nicky said:

"What kind of logic is that!"

"Action before logic!"

"Hey!"

Can you talk like that even after you’ve been attacked yourself?

"Don't try to justify yourself! You keep saying Kobold, Kobold... wait, ah!"

Nicky changed her expression and directed her gaze to the back of the passage. There were the Kobolds that Naga had defeated. Nicky glared at me fiercely.

"How terrible! Kobolds are animals too! Don't you know the word coexistence and co-prosperity!"

"I didn't do it! And besides, we were attacked!"

"I wasn't attacked, so it's fine!"

The beastly voices were much closer than I thought. Kobolds! They were launching an attack!!

Everyone except me and Naga stiffened. The opponents weren't visible, but—*Gyau, Gugu, Gigyan!* How many were there? As if to intimidate us, barking echoes sounded from the front and back of the passage. Of course, for me and Naga, the number of Kobolds wasn't much of a problem, but.....

"Hmph! For mere Kobolds to challenge Naga the Serpent of the White Snake! I'll praise you for that much courage! Now—!"

"—Wait a minute, Naga!"

I restrained Naga, who had been speaking arrogantly and was about to cast an attack spell.

"What is it, Lina?"

"More importantly, this—"

I patted Nicky on the shoulder and said:

"Let's have Branch Chief Nicky show us an example of coexistence and co-prosperity."

"Ehhhhhhhhhh!?"

Nicky screamed grandly.

"That's impossible!"

Wow, she said that so lightly. Well, I agree it's impossible. But do it.

"What kind of logic is that!"

"Action before logic, right?"

Even as I spoke, many small shadows began to appear at the distant ends of the passages in front and behind us.

".....Th-that....."

The raspy voice was from the Vice Branch Chief. As the barking continued to ring out, the Kobolds lined up in a row along the walls—left and right—of the passage in front. It was—yes, like guards protecting a king on his throne.

Walking toward us in between them, slowly, was a black shadow as large as a cow. Was this the leader? The one who had been giving orders to the Kobolds? It stepped into the circle of light—

I was speechless. Naga was speechless. The Vice Branch Chief was speechless.

Before I knew it, the Kobolds' barking had stopped.

Nicky, while trembling slightly—called its name.

"...Ke...Kero-chan.....?"

Kyaun, the opponent responded with a bark.

A dog! Yes, that’s right. Leading the Kobolds and walking toward us with great majesty was a Chow Chow the size of an ox.

"Whaaat on earth is that!?"

Our screams harmonized so perfectly that it could be called a masterwork.

"W-w-wait a minute, Nicky! Is that really your Kero-chan!?"

To my prying, Nicky shook her head left and right, frantically.

"It’s not, it’s not! Before we fell, he was a normal size!"

"—I see—!"

The Vice Branch Chief muttered in a hoarse voice, gradually retreating along with Naga and the others.

"Kero-chan must have grown giant in order to adapt to the unique environment of the underground ruins."

As if that’s possible! I wanted to deliver a retort with all my might, but in reality, the huge dog was approaching us while panting, *heh-heh-heh-heh*.

The Vice Branch Chief continued speaking while still moving behind me and Nicky.

"And perhaps, Kero-chan dominated the Kobolds with his true strength and rose to the top of the pack..... When you think about it, Kobolds are somewhat dog-like, aren't they? It wouldn't be strange at all for them to have the same habits."

Is that so?

"The reason the Kobolds' movements were strange was likely because their pack leader, Kero-chan, was desperately searching for his owner—Nicky....."

Even as he spoke, Kero-chan came closer and closer. I pushed Nicky, who was trying to retreat, and stopped her in her tracks, placing myself right in front of the giant Kero-chan.

"Well, Nicky, isn't this great? Kero-chan grew up to be big and strong just as you wished. And on top of that, he's successful enough to be at the top of a Kobold pack."

"Umm, the 'strong and strong' I was imagining is different from this direction..."

Kero-chan was right under our noses now. I embraced Nicky's shoulders and gave her back a push.

"Vice Branch Chief, stop saying stupid things and do something!"

"—And so—" I continued, pushing Nicky toward the beast. "The request was to rescue Kero-chan, but well, since the dog and his owner have reunited safely, this is a happy resolution, right?"

Instead of the stunned Nicky, Kero-chan let out a single bark, as if he understood what we were saying. He then bit onto the collar of Nicky’s clothes and dragged her off into the depths.

"Wait a minuteeeeeee.....!"

"Nicky. It's great, isn't it? The coexistence and co-prosperity with Kobolds that you were talking about—you can do it right here."

"Ehh?!? Me, right here!?"

Nicky’s scream echoed through the ruins. The shadow of Kero-chan proceeded deep into the passage, and with that, the surrounding Kobolds also departed.

The Vice Branch Chief stood nearby, dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief, and said with deep emotion:

"The Branch Chief is happy. She can live happily forever with Kero-chan, her favorite dog, and the Kobolds. Here."

Watching them go, the Vice Branch Chief added:

"They are going back... Chows are... Is this, perhaps, a warning from the natural world against humanity's reckless animal welfare?"

I don't think so. Naga and I chimed in simultaneously.

Eventually, after Nicky, Kero-chan, and the Kobolds had all vanished, only the cat ears Nicky had dropped remained in the passageway.

The End.

Farewell, Beast Ears

One day.

When I finished dinner and returned to the inn, I found the "Cat-Ear Old Man" rolled up like a sushi roll in front of the entrance. I walked past him nonchalantly, pretending not to notice.

"Not flinching? As expected of you, Lina Inverse!"

I was called out by name from behind, and having no other choice, I stopped. Honestly, I had a hunch. I couldn't see the old man's face well as he rolled on his back, but the cat ears on his head were clearly etched in my memory. They were the same ones worn by a member of a certain animal welfare organization I had dealt with a while ago.

For a split second, I considered ignoring the call and heading into the inn, but since I had been named, playing dumb would be useless. I braced myself, turned around, and faced the voice.

It was the row of houses across from the inn. There, standing on the roof with the full moon at their backs, were a number of silhouettes. At a glance, there were about ten of them.

What are you guys!!

Perhaps mistaking my exclamation for a typical question, one of the shadows—wearing round ears—leaked a smug, satisfied chuckle.

"We know, Lina Inverse. You conspired with that man there and cast the World Animal Welfare League Raltigue South Branch Chief, Nicky Kraft, into the depths of the earth."

It was exactly that incident I had been involved in.

I had accepted a request from the dog-loving Branch Chief Nicky to find her lost pet. In the end, the good-for-nothing Nicky was left behind in the underground ruins along with her dog, and the Vice Branch Chief—the man currently rolled up at my feet—had inherited her position.

...Ugh... How embarrassing...

While I was thinking this, spectators began to gather little by little. Are there nothing but animal welfare organizations in this country? Regardless, I sort of understood the situation. I raised my voice toward the group on the roof.

"I see. In other words, you didn't like that the Branch Chief's position was changed without your permission, so you're going to punish this old man... and me as an example, right?"

"Nicky doesn't matter."

To my prediction, a different shadow voiced a denial. They were naturally wearing animal ears, but I couldn't tell what kind of animal they were from the shadows alone.

"The problem is that you defeated a rare species of Kobold with an attack spell. Ignoring animal cruelty is an act unbecoming of a member of the League! Therefore, we, the Raltigue 12 Branch Chiefs of the Animal Welfare League, have handed down our sanctions! You, who triggered such a situation, will also take responsibility."

"W-wait a second!" I protested.

Of course, I didn't intend to argue self-defense. There are plenty of people and organizations in the world who, even if their original philosophy was sound, eventually lose sight of their goals or go about things the wrong way. I was well aware that normal protests were useless against that type of person.

But, it *is* possible to shift the target of their anger.

"If that's the case, what about the sorcerer named Naga the Serpent who was with me? The request was originally accepted by Naga, and it was she who got me involved..."

"We are aware of that too. We have tracked her existence and observed her behavior for some time. And the result is—"

The shadow continued, "That one is not human, but an animal, so we will excuse her."

I had no choice but to be convinced by that opinion. At the very least, insisting that Naga was human just to escape this situation—that was something I, as a human, must not do.

"Today is just a greeting. But starting tomorrow—don't think you can sleep soundly."

"Tonight, curse your own stupidity, tremble, and sleep, Lina Inverse! But—"

The shadows let out a roaring laugh that echoed in the night sky. They used a ladder nearby to descend from the roof one by one.

Of course, I considered the tactic of blowing them away with an attack spell while they were still on the roof, or removing the ladder to make them cry. I could certainly have defeated the people gathered there if I did that.

But my true enemy wasn't just the dozen or so people I could see. The entire animal welfare organization, with no idea how many more were behind them, stood in my way. Even if I just defeated the Branch Chiefs in front of me now, it wouldn't be a solution. *Lina Inverse is a coward. She must not be forgiven. Revenge for the Branch Chief*. They would surely keep sending assassins under that logic, one after another.

That would never end. That’s what I thought. That’s why, for now, I didn't make a move against them.

The Branch Chiefs—no, there were 11 now that Nicky was missing—eventually disappeared into the darkness. I had crossed paths with them several times before, sometimes as enemies, sometimes as people sharing a common foe—but it seemed the time for a final showdown had finally come.

"Wait, Liiiina Iiiiinveeeerse!"

A man's voice, burning with rage, echoed through the town in broad daylight. Birds flew away, townspeople turned to look, and I had no choice but to turn around. Standing there was a man. He looked to be in his early twenties. He was thin with sharp eyes. In his left hand, he held a long staff decorated with ornaments. On his head, he wore animal ears.

Just by that, I knew who he was even without him introducing himself. The townspeople frowned, and a little girl led by her mother stared longingly at the animal ears, but the man didn't care about such things. He stared at me intently."What is the meaning of this!?"

I roared, holding up the parchment gripped in my right hand. Of course, I remembered it well. The night before last, after receiving the declaration of war from the Twelve Branch Chiefs—I had taken the sushi-rolled old man to a local doctor, returned to the inn, and caught some sleep. When I woke up the next morning and tried to leave, the innkeeper had handed it to me, saying it had been delivered for me early that morning.

It was a challenge. After writing about how it wasn't their style to gang up on a single woman and that they didn't want to involve innocent townspeople, it specified a one-on-one duel, including the time and place. It seemed the author of the challenge had finally caught up with me.

Anyway, I scratched my head and looked at the man with a troubled expression.

"Look, there's no 'what is the meaning of this' about it. It’s exactly as written."

At the bottom of the challenge the man held up were two words I had added myself. On one of them—"I will be absent"—I had drawn a thick, heavy circle. I had handed the challenge to the innkeeper after adding that, telling him to give it to whoever brought it if they came back.

"Don't you mess with meeeeeee!"

The man slammed it onto the ground and stomped on it, shouting, "You keep us waiting, you stand us up, and this is what we get when we go to the inn?! You really know how to treat us like fools!"

Of course, from my side, if I had to fight, it would be much surer to take them out one by one than to face a whole mob at once—but I had chosen a different method. It had been over a day since then, in a different town.

"......Buh...?"

The man faltered at my observation.

"So what does that mean? You wrote 'one-on-one,' but you were actually planning to ambush me alone with a whole crowd to beat me up? That’s mighty impressive. 'World

Animal Welfare League'... was it? If you’re getting protected by guys like you, the animals themselves are having a really hard time, aren't they?"

Provoked by me, the man’s face flushed with anger.

"It’s the World Animal Welfare League! Don't mock our principles and activities!"

"Of course I'm going to mock them!" I retorted flatly. "Putting animal welfare above human life? And on top of that, purging even outsiders who don't follow your methods? There are perfectly fine animal welfare organizations in this world, but because weirdos like you exist, everything gets misunderstood! It’s a huge pain for everyone involved!"

"Kuh.....! You don't understand our principles and you just say whatever you want...! I get it now! There’s no room for discussion or compromise! Then, I’ll send you to your end right here!"

I directed a blank stare at the man, who was shouting louder than ever.

"—So, you’re distracting me while the two people diagonally behind me launch a surprise attack, huh?"

".....Wha....."

The man looked shaken by my calm words.

"You want to say, 'How did you know?' Things like that are obvious just from their presence."

Saying that, I sent a glance over my shoulder toward where I felt their presence. They were blending in with the onlookers, but two people were clearly radiating hostility toward me. To my right-back was a woman in her twenties. To my left-back was a guy pushing thirty.

"If you're going to be like that, I have no choice!"

At the woman's voice, the onlookers around us hurriedly stepped back.

"In any case, it’s just a matter of finishing it here! No need to trouble the others!"

Saying that, the woman reached behind her waist and attached something to her head. It was indeed that rabbit-eared woman from that day. She was carrying a long,

decorated stick—the same uniform weapon as the others. To me, it looked like a thick club with useless decorations, but—

"Take this! Our strike!"

At the rabbit woman's command, all three started running at once! They probably intended a simultaneous three-sided attack, but they were naive. As they lunged, a bad feeling raced down my spine!

The woman’s weapon looked like nothing more than a novice panicking and swinging it around—but for some reason, an afterimage flashed through my field of vision in that moment!

A surprise attack weapon, huh! Well, that fits you people who are all talk!

As soon as I realized the trick, there was no danger. I reflexively twisted my body wide. The wind whistled right beside me.

"A-da!?" "Gwa!" "Gah!"

The screams came from far behind me—from the onlookers.

"—Tch!"

I heard the rabbit woman click her tongue. *I see!* I ran off to the side, distanced myself, and turned around.

"I get it! That stick has stones loaded inside, right?"

"......!?"

The woman's movements stopped for a moment, her identity successfully exposed. I kicked off the ground and dashed toward the rabbit woman!

She must have gouged grooves near both ends of the thick club and packed them with stones or something. That way, only when swung in a certain direction would the loaded stone fly at the opponent. If you fought them thinking they were just normal clubs, stones would suddenly fly at you from outside your reach. It was a trick that might work against an amateur, but to my eyes—a warrior and sorcerer—their movements were disjointed and their stances were full of openings.

"Wait!"

The woman's face showed shock, perhaps because it was unexpected. The rabbit woman hurriedly stopped and swung her club. Of course, she was far outside the range.

"Stop it! If you use something like that in a place like this, you'll involve the people around us, won't you?"

"Like I'd listen if you told me to stop!" "Who would!" "Like hell I'll stop!"

The three were completely enraged and swung their clubs around wildly. I dodged them easily. Occasionally, a stone would fly off, smashing market stalls and hitting the walls of nearby houses. The onlookers scrambled to escape, and screams and angry voices intermingled.

"I'm done with this!"

I shouted and ran straight away. As I ran, the three swung their clubs at my back, but no stones were fired.

"What!?"

The three were surprised and flustered. It was a simple case of running out of ammo. Due to the mechanism, they couldn't load many stones to begin with. Getting enraged and firing them off quickly meant they would run out soon; it was a mistake born of being amateurs unaccustomed to fighting. By the time they realized it, I had already escaped to a distance where it was impossible for them to catch up.

But naturally, they weren't that soft. They wouldn't just let me go after escaping from just those three.

The next day, in a large town I stopped by.

Waiting for me in the middle of the main street was a man of about forty. He had a refined, gentlemanly appearance, and an aura of elegance drifted from his posture. He didn't call my name, but his eyes were clearly fixed on me. When I stopped at a distance—

"The small fry from yesterday were rude," the man said, just as I expected.

"—That means you’re one of them from the Animal Welfare League too!"

At my raised voice, the passersby stopped. With elegant movements, the man took out animal ears, attached them to his head, and spoke in an entirely calm tone.

"Indeed. I am the World Animal Welfare League Raltigue Northeast Branch Chief, Joe the Ferret."

"Ferret ears... what is that... and the branch location is weird too... You called those three yesterday 'small fry,' but I don't think the boss of a branch in such a pinpoint location is that big of a deal, do you?"

The man’s expression didn't change a bit at my words.

"I’d be troubled if you misunderstood. To us, the difference between big and small fry is simply how much love one can pour into animals. If you treat them with love, the animals will surely respond."

He boasted calmly. However, Joe put his fingers to his mouth and blew a finger whistle. But all I heard was the small sound of wind. I smiled for an instant—but then I realized.

Joe's expression wasn't filled with the awkwardness of a failed whistle, but with the conviction of victory.

"What did you do!?"

At my question, he showed a fearless grin for the first time.

"I told you. Animals respond too. There are many who can feel sounds, colors, and scents that humans cannot. I can converse with them using such methods. The result is this! Look!"

The world began to stir. The onlookers screamed, startled by the small shadows slipping past their feet. Surrounding me and Joe, gathered from all over town, were dozens—no, over a hundred—ferrets!

Facing this situation, Joe gloated.

"Fu-hahahaha! Did you see? These are the ferrets I called from all over town with my silent whistle!"

"I hate to say it, but for a guy who called them, this town has way too many ferrets!"

"I think so too, but... you claim to be an animal welfare activist, and you're actually thinking of making ferrets fight!?"

"Of course not!" Joe dismissed my accusation with a laugh. "Why would I make such cute ferrets fight? ...I won't *make* them fight."

The corners of his mouth curled into a smile. *Wait... don't tell me...* A realization froze my spine.

"Stop it! If you do that, you'll be...!"

I tried to stop him, but he only smiled more deeply.

"Fu... so you noticed? You might be the only one who knows what I'm about to do to these ferrets! But pain to a normal person isn't necessarily pain to everyone. To me, a lover of ferrets, this is actually quite pleasant!"

His fingers rose to his mouth again. I hurriedly chanted a spell.

"Wait—!"

Joe's silent whistle sounded. And then, yes, the ferrets followed their orders—or rather, their instincts.

I am Lina Inverse. A ferret is a member of the weasel family, carnivorous. They are sometimes kept for pest control.

Characteristic: Their farts are incredibly, insanely stinking.

In an instant, the town turned into a living hell. In the yellow-tinged vision, onlookers choked, collapsed, and some stopped moving entirely. Somewhere, a child was crying.

The wind barrier I had desperately chanted just in time had managed to save me. Still, to fight in this state, I would have to dissolve the wind barrier. That was obviously impossible. Maintaining the barrier, I chanted another spell and floated lightly into the air.

"You plan to run!?"

Joe's voice reached me slightly through the wind barrier. Along with a faint smell.

As I ascended higher, I yelled, "Obviously I'm running away from this kind of thing!"

"Coward! Come down and fight me!"

"Don't say such absurd things, you perverted ferret-obsessed geezer!"

"What do you mean 'pervert'!? Because I have a heart that loves ferrets, even their farts don't smell! In other words, this proves the depth of my love...!"

While we were shouting at each other, I continued to rise, the distance between us widening—and before long, the voice of the ferret-geezer could no longer be heard from far below.

It was a night where the night air felt strangely sticky. It was midnight. The bar on the first floor of the inn was still open, and the voices of the drunken patrons reached this room I had rented on the second floor.

At that moment, a small sound echoed, distinct from the clamor of the drunkards. A sound of something cutting through the night air. The sound of the inn's mud wall ringing slightly.

The next instant—*Thump!*

The room's window was suddenly kicked in, and a shadow loomed over the bed! The empty, vacant bed.

"It seems that while you're good at chasing animals, you're not very good at stalking people."

Told that, the shadow looked up toward me, standing in the corner of the room. The day after Joe the Ferret's attack, I had entered this town and checked into this inn, knowing full well that someone was tailing me.

"If you're going to stalk me so obviously, I have no choice but to take countermeasures."

"......Come to think of it, you said you knew the position of the ambush party from their presence the first time, too....."

The man who raised his head had animal ears. They looked like cat ears, but from his all-black appearance, they were probably—

"A bat?"

"Indeed."

Curving the corners of his mouth, the man smiled.

The man had a gaunt face and a lean body. Through his disheveled black hair, his large eyes glared sharply. Yes, he had glided through the air to pursue me. The man and I faced off between the floor and the table. There was no need for long talk here. I threw open the room door and bolted, racing down the hallway toward the stairs that led below.

"—I won't let you escape—"

Behind me, I heard the bat-man's small mutter. I ignored him, skipped several steps on the staircase, and reached the first floor of the inn. The clamor enveloped me; the tavern was more crowded than I had expected.

"Hey now, little lady, children shouldn't—"

Before one of the drunks could finish his teasing words, a large shadow crossed the tavern! I leaped far to the side. The floor where I had been standing just a moment before creaked and cracked! The bat-man landed on one of the tables. With a heavy *thud*, the patrons fell silent, not understanding what had just happened. My voice slipped into that silence.

".....Come to think of it, I didn't even catch your name."

"I am Zonge of the Bat, one of the twelve Branch Chiefs of the World Animal Welfare League."

The man introduced himself while standing on the table in a strange, unnaturally hunched posture. Under the lamplight, I could see black fabric stretched from the sleeves to the thighs of his dark clothing. He looked more like a flying squirrel than a bat, though of course, no matter how slender he was, a human couldn't possibly glide with something like that.

"Though I harbor no grudge against you, I cannot overlook your actions, which defy the spirit of animal welfare. I shall punish you in the name of a greater cause. Prepare yourself."

Spouting such selfish nonsense with an overly dramatic tone, he kicked off the table, spread his arms and legs, and began gliding through the air to the left and right as if to show off! The patrons started making a fuss over the bizarre spectacle. Some ran

away, some hid, some vowed to stop drinking, and others threw tips at Zonge—the confusion was a colorful mess. Zonge's loud, mocking laughter rang out among them!

"Hahahaha! Behold! My deep love for bats has made such a technique possible! How great is the affection for animals!"

"Don't lie! You're just using magic, aren't you!"

I shouted, pointing at Zonge in the void. Yes, he was simply using some kind of flight magic. It was a spell I didn't know, but I was certain he was continuously surrounding himself with wind to dance through the air. The reason was simple: when Zonge had landed earlier, the napkins on the table had fluttered toward an unnatural direction from the wind. Zonge's face twisted in agitation at my observation.

"What are you saying! I'm telling you this is the power of my love for animals! How sacrilegious to doubt it..... I can no longer forgive someone who denies love for animals!"

He insisted stubbornly, muttering under his breath while gliding. He was chanting a spell, just as I thought. I raced through the confused tavern, and soon Zonge's spell was complete!

"Blast Impact!"

Gogan! Just in the nick of time, the moment I leaped back, the invisible shockwave Zonge fired pulverized the wooden table that had been behind me!

"Did you see the power of love for animals!"

"That has nothing to do with animals or bats!"

I retorted, jumping outside the shop. In the town sunken into the night, lights still flickered here and there. It was the bustling district of a large town. There were other taverns open until this late hour scattered about. I dashed toward one of those lights!

"Do you think you can get away!?"

I heard Zonge's voice behind me. I ignored him and chanted a spell under my breath as I ran. The sound of wind cutting came not from behind, but from overhead. Ahead of my upward gaze was a white shadow bathed in moonlight! Seeing the animal ears

on its head, I instantly unleashed the spell I had originally prepared for Zonge toward it!

"Dame Wind!"

It was a spell meant only to repel strong winds, but it was enough to knock an opponent in mid-air off balance! At the same time, I leaped far backward.

"Ugh!"

"It’s ridiculous for people like you who keep inconveniencing others to be preaching about animal welfare!"

The shockwave Zonge fired swept through the place where I had been standing just before, shattering the wall of a house further ahead with a deafening sound.

"The one who should be disgusted is me!"

The white woman barked. She must have been waiting for my movements to stop before launching her strike, but it was all too obvious. When Zonge landed on the ground, the white woman pushed herself up. Hearing the commotion, drunks began peeking out from various taverns. Some people peeked from nearby houses and inn windows. I glared straight at Zonge and his companion.

"Tch! Enough of this already!"

"You! Do you not know the saying: 'There is no evil in those who love animals'? Therefore! Love for animals is justice! And if it is justice, all its actions are correct!"

"There's no such logic! You’re being unreasonable, you owl woman!"

"I am not an owl! I am Finezia of the White Scops Owl!"

Saying that, the woman flipped her right hand. The decorations resembling bird feathers, sewn in a row on her sleeves, flared dramatically.

"World Animal Welfare League, Raltigue East Branch Chief! An indomitable apostle who travels to deliver the hammer of justice to the loveless!"

I sent a wry smile her way.

"Either way, even if I tell you to stop, you’re still planning to fight, right?"

"......Of course."

A small, wry smile appeared at the corners of the man’s mouth as well.

"Then—come at me."

My call was the signal! *Yes, yes, another big mess to get involved in!* In the corner of my vision, Zonge floated into the air again. Finezia, on the other hand, didn't move yet..... *I see*. I kicked off the ground, chanted a spell under my breath, and dashed straight toward Finezia!

"You!"

"Words are easy. But can you actually perform them?"

The bat-man’s quiet voice cooled the white woman, who was about to get furious.

"You have some nerve turning your back on me!"

Behind me, the bat raised a provocative voice, but of course, I ignored him. Even so, the owl woman began to chant.

"Wing Bind!"

But my spell had activated an instant earlier. Seeing this, a clear look of shock spread across her face. It was only natural; I had used the same spell as her. Yes, the bat-man was gliding with a sustained spell, while the owl woman was manipulating a high-speed flight spell called "Wing Bind."

It was a spell that wrapped one’s body in a wind barrier to fly at high speed. It looked flashy and easy, but since it was difficult to control and had various restrictions, not many people used it. I slammed my wind-shielded self into the nearby house wall, changed my trajectory again, and attacked the bat-man from an unexpected direction!

The moment the woman had tried to launch a diving attack earlier, I had realized she was using this spell and decided to show her I could use it too. Since this spell tended to make movements linear, it actually wasn't that hard to predict her trajectory. The shock of having her own spell turned against her had stopped her movements.

"Finezia!"

Hearing the bat-man’s voice, she came to her senses and tried to dodge, but it was too late. *Doga!* My wind-shielded body, rushing in at high speed, sent her flying spectacularly. I changed my trajectory, scraping along the building’s wall, and headed for the bat-man. The bat-man frantically fired a shockwave at me! One hit grazed the edge of my wind barrier! The recoil threw off my trajectory, but the bat-man, who had let his guard down while changing his own path, couldn't possibly dodge it.

Don! The man fell to the ground after being struck. I adjusted my trajectory and dispelled the spell.

"—Ngyue!?"

I landed on the back of the bat-man, who had been trying to get up. With this, he was completely knocked out.

".....No.....that's impossible....."

When I looked toward the murmur, Finezia the owl woman was wobbling as she stood up further down the road.

"You..... you used the same spell as me....."

I shook my finger at her, "Chi-chi-chi."

"The spell is the same, yes—but you’re just trying it out. I actually know how to use it."

"You talk big.....! You got lucky and beat Zonge just now, but....."

"Lucky? If that’s how it looked to you, you’ll never beat me in your life."

"What? .....Wait, could it be?"

I nodded and glanced at the man at my feet.

"That's exactly it. I intentionally took his strike on the edge of my wind barrier, calculated the change in trajectory, and hit him from the side. I knew if I went straight, I’d just get dodged."

".....How.....could you possibly do something like that.....!"

"I just did. Just now."

After I said that calmly, the owl woman fell silent.

"......Ah—but you guys keep sending these pathetic assassins at me, over and over and over again. It’s annoying for me to deal with. So, how about this? Why don't we just settle it once and for all right here? I’ll take on all twelve of you..... no, all eleven of you, all at once."

At my mocking words, the woman finally got furious.

"What did you say!!"

"Let's see..... there’s an abandoned house a little east of this town, right?"

Without caring about her indignation, I continued.

"How about the day after tomorrow at noon? Of course, I won't stand you up. Oh, but if you’re scared, you don't have to come. Refusing to pick a fight with an opponent you can't beat is the same even in the animal world you love so much, right? .....Well, come to think of it, maybe you guys are better suited to keep up this pathetic, petty harassment."

At my words, the owl woman’s shoulders shook as she laughed.

"Fwahahahaha!"

"You’re an idiot! You! If you had just been defeated by the first group or us, you might have only suffered minor wounds. Let me tell you: the five people who stand above us—the ones you haven't met yet—are in a completely different league of strength and status than I am!"

".....And let me guess, the pattern where I open the lid and get disappointed?"

"......You don't get it..... You really don't understand at all! Fine! If that’s what you want, I’ll call them! But with this, you’ve basically decided your life will end in two days. You’d better do whatever you want to do by then! Fwahahahahahaha!"

The woman laughed like a maniac. And thus, the situation reached its final phase.....

A line of men and women walked down the road. They walked with tired, hanging heads, animal ears on their heads, their hands tied with ropes. Guarding them were Raltigue soldiers.

"......I think....."

One of the men being taken away—Joe the Ferret—looked up and said to me as I walked alongside the line, humming a tune.

"I feel like reporting us to the authorities is playing dirty, don't you think?"

I had gone to the local soldiers' station and "cooperated in good faith" to help them crack down on the "strange organization that keeps ruining the town." I had gone to the promised time and place, saw the Branch Chiefs all gathered together, and signaled the soldiers who had secretly surrounded us to arrest them all at once.

I had caused enough of a scene in so many places that even if the League had members with connections to the authorities, it would surely be impossible for them to sweep the whole affair under the rug. This meant an investigation would now be launched into their organization. I didn't know if the organization would actually clean up its act, but at the very least, they would no longer be in a position to bother people like me.

"You can say it's 'dirty' all you want," I replied to Joe's protest. "But I didn't break our promise. I'm taking all of you down at once. No backing out on my end. See? Just like I said."

Joe fell silent, his mouth set in a grim line. I ignored him and continued.

"To begin with, you've been picking fights with a good-natured, ordinary citizen like me, chasing me from town to town, and on top of that, you cause a scene every single time, inconveniencing completely unrelated people. No matter how you look at it, you guys are the ones in the wrong, so obviously I had to report you."

"......? Could it be, you....."

The voice came from the person being led behind Joe, who wore koala ears. It was probably one of those "higher-ranking" individuals the owl woman had mentioned. I didn't even know his name.

"You provoked us, didn't you? You made a big deal out of incidents in every town we went to on purpose! To get the soldiers moving! To involve all the others, too!"

"As if."

A stir went through not just the Branch Chiefs, but the surrounding soldiers as well—but of course, I immediately denied that sharp-witted accusation.

"You're just trying to pin the blame on me to save your own skins because you don't want to be the only ones getting arrested, but the soldiers aren't stupid enough to fall for that. Most of all, fundamentally speaking, you were the ones who went around doing whatever you pleased without a care for the people around you, weren't you?"

"......Kuh....."

At my words, the koala ears shut his mouth, looking frustrated. Naturally, he probably realized it too: once they had caused so many incidents all over the place, no one would listen to such claims from them.

And thus, one overly zealous animal welfare organization was forced to restructure.

But humans, take heed. As long as there are cute animals in this world, the seeds of welfare organizations will never die. And someday, among the tens, hundreds, even thousands of groups out there, one will surely appear that takes things too far again. Watching them as they were hauled away, I whispered to myself:

"—They won't be—the last animal welfare organization.—"

(The End)

Afterword

Author + L + S

S: Hey, everybody! We're here to bring you the 22nd volume of *Slayers Special*, "G Hunter Volks"!

L: Whoa, wait a minute!? A character everyone had forgotten existed is popping up right from the start with such pathetic energy? This is unreasonable! I want to file a legal appeal!

Author: Calm down. You, too. It's just that she appeared on the New Year's card, so she's getting a little full of herself.

L: Appeared on the New Year's card? Even though she's just a subordinate "S"?

Author: Exactly! This year's New Year's card was drawn by the original illustrator and me, and for some reason, "S" was in the foreground! Hahaha. I had prepared a traditional *haori-hakama* outfit a while ago because I thought, *this is finally my era!*

L: On top of that, "S" is treated as bigger than me. I see! Fine, I understand! I accept your challenge!

Author: No, wait, that's not a challenge—it's just—

(Sound of scissors snipping away: ...sari-kiri-kiri-sari-kiri-sari-sari-sari...)

L: —I wonder if everyone knows. About the fact that certain pond snails are omnivorous and use an organ called a radula—which is like a file—to scrape off their food bit by bit.

S: (Smiling as she shows off the New Year's card) That's right. I'm the one in the foreground, standing out.

L: Don't talk like it's someone else's problem. You know, the sin of standing out more than me is quite a heavy one.

S: Oh, that looks painful. Truly.

L: And that is how it is! Now, since one side has been ground into powder, there are still plenty of hungry snails here.

S: (Stammering) No, that—that's—! Ack, ack, ack! ...Wait! That's it, Lord L! If you look closely, this is wrong! I've solved the mystery!

L: Mystery? What are you talking about?

S: It's the mystery of this New Year's card! In short, the reason this card can't be "Lord L and S" is simple! Because only by drawing me in front can you read this card as "S," "A"nd "L"! In other words, it spells "S-A-L"—the zodiac sign for this year!

L: It's fine. I'm sure I'll be back in the afterword for the next volume anyway. But that aside, the fact remains that you are in front and standing out more than me.

L: So♪—*snip, snip*—♪

S: Wait... ?

(...sari-sari-kiri-sari-sari-kiri-sari-sari...)

L: ...But then again... if that's the case, that's one convoluted pun...

S: The author seems to like that kind of thing, doesn't he? Uselessly.

L: Hmm. If that's the case, maybe I did a slightly bad thing by having the snails eat you based on a misunderstanding. ♡

S: I don't think the author will be very pleased if you dismiss it as "slightly," but...

L: Living, perhaps, means simply continuing to inherit other lives.

Anyway, our research has determined that in the food chain hierarchy, snails are superior to both the author and subordinate "S."

Hmm. By the way, the mention of the New Year's card reminded me—isn't this *Slayers* series celebrating its 15th anniversary this year or something? That means I, who was born alongside *Slayers*, am also a subtle 15 years old! *Umyu! Lovely!*

...Oh, and for those of you who just thought to yourselves, *15 years old? In the setting, you're billions of years old!*—be careful from now on, whether the moon is bright or dark. ♪ Something falling from the sky is going to strike your vital organs. ♪

And now that we've had a friendly communication with all you readers, I'll see you in the next volume if you survive! ♡

(Afterword — The End)